The Ones Who were Chosen

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Chapter One

One More

The girl glanced round nervously; wondering that someone was following her. Like a fox leaving a trail for hounds that were near. Nowhere was she feel truly safe, because of what she was.

Her pure white hair lifted as she turned and continued to run. Her matching white dress trailed after her in a ghostly fashion as her bare feet slapped with every step upon the pavement. Always she was searching around her for signs of danger, warnings that her pursuers were nearby. Her grey eyes never rested.

She would run until she found somewhere to hide. Then run again, before she stayed too long in one place and risked being caught.

As was her life. Because of what she was.

The woman slammed the door. Hoisting the strap of her handbag up her shoulder she stormed away down the stairs.

From inside the apartment silence ensued. Lucas aged nineteen stood just inside staring at the closed door. There were sudden hurried footsteps approaching from behind. His brother Reuben burst into the room, two years younger. Similar in appearance to his brother, with the same jet black hair swept back and pretty blue eyes. They were both very handsome.

'What is it? What's happened?'

'She's gone' Lucas replied calmly.

'What, *again*?'

'Yeah.'

Lucas fidgeted on the spot, sticking his hands into his pockets, shoulders slumped.

'What set her off this time?'

'Just the usual' Lucas replied '…nothing.'

His tone was weary.

'Well…what do we do now?' Reuben asked.

There was a pause.

'Lucas?'

Lucas looked back at his brother with a devilish glint in his eye.

'I say we make some fun.'

Drake leant forwards on the desk with a huff, listening to the teacher drone on and on about something he had long since lost interest in. It was chemistry, a subject he usually enjoyed, however lately it had become more and more tedious for him. Now the lessons just dragged.

Drake was an ambitious adolescent nearing twenty, soon to leave the comfortable routine that college offered him. He looked forward to this, and his dreams were big. But nothing his teachers or his career advisors offered him was appealing, and he had yet to find something he wished to pursue. For he had skills that others hadn't, skills he wished to use. If only he knew where.

Drake watched the teacher moving his lips and walking back and forth before the class, waving his arms around as he talked as he always did. Drake found himself wondering then, if he tied the man's arms to his side, would he still be able to talk? His eyes drifted out of focus, as did his thoughts. He snapped back seconds later when the teacher suddenly raised his voice in enthusiasm about a particular point he was making. His lecturer was a fat balding man with glasses, friendly enough, if not a little annoying at times. The other students seemed to be paying more attention; they had their books and pencil cases out and about their desks. The exams were not far off, and most were listening eagerly, save for two girls who were whispering and passing notes.

Drake sighed again, beginning to fiddle with the studs and chains on his leather bracelet. He then checked himself in the reflection in the window beside him, flicking back his light brown hair and admiring his own handsome features. He sighed again, before returning to the doodling in his book. Naturally good at art though not interested in taking it on as a subject, now he added the finishing touches to his picture. A large breasted woman fighting with a sort of giant sea

serpent, her hair sweeping dramatically back and spear thrust out at the serpent in mid lunge, its jaws gaping.

'He's up there' Lucas said.

'Are you sure?'

'Positive.'

'How do you even know his timetable?' Reuben asked, climbing up on his brother's shoulders.

'I just know ok' Lucas retorted, rising from his kneeling position to a wobbling stand.

'Stand still' Reuben hissed. 'Get closer to the wall.'

Lucas did so, stumbling as he struggled to keep his brother straight and balanced as he held onto his shins. He gave a cheeky grin through the window they stood before to the classroom inside. Many of the students had noticed them, and more were turning to glance curiously their way.

'Alright up there?' Lucas asked, diverting his attention back to his brother.

'Yeah' his brother called back.

Inside the classroom on the second level, Drake had seemed to have suddenly noticed something drawn on the table. He glanced up at the teacher; then lifted his pencil, contributing to it.

Outside, Reuben fell against the wall, using it to balance himself better.

'Can you see him?' his Lucas asked from below.

Reuben craned his head further.

'Got him.'

Lucas brought out a tiny metal ball from his pocket.

'Here.'

He threw it up to Reuben who caught it swiftly. Reuben held it carefully in one hand as he tapped on the glass lightly.

Drake was distracted from his graffiti by a tapping noise. He glanced around to see the top of someone's head at the bottom of the window, with light blue eyes staring back at him.

He looked forward again. The teacher had his back turned.

Still facing ahead Drake leaned to the side and slowly flicked the latch, pulling the window up by a tiny fraction. Drake silently took the small device Reuben handed him and leant back in his chair, trying his best to look inconspicuous. The teacher was still distracted. Standing on his tiptoes to write on the very top of the white board, book in one hand; pen in the other. Most of the rest of the class were paying attention to the teacher, Drake felt grateful that the whispering girls were distracted too. He quickly wrote a note upon his desk, and then turned his attention to the thing Reuben had handed him.

Drake fingered the device in his hand. It was a curious thing, one of Lucas's own personal creations, for he had many. Many hours Lucas had sat in his room tinkering with toys of scrap metal and his mysterious powers and brilliant mind. And this was the result. A

sphere in shape, it had many shallow ridges and grooves running upon it. Drake turned it over. It had what looked like tiny screw heads protruding out from the surface. He tweaked one of these; then sent it rolling across the classroom.

'…and so the hydrogen bonds in water act unusually.'

The ball rolled under the teacher's desk. There was a second's delay, and then it exploded.

The entire class jumped in shock, coughing as the thick purple smoke enveloped the entire front of the classroom. Like a typical smoke bomb, very effective and just as fun as the last one.

By the time the smoke cleared enough for the teacher to realise one of his students were missing, Drake was already long gone.

The lecturer approached the empty chair, and saw the writing on the desk, next to the picture of a man with wings newly added.

Go to work, Go to school, Come home
Obey the law, Pay tax, Eat chips

CCTV
I am free

Running and laughing as they went, Drake raced the brothers out of the grounds of the college, feet pounding on the smooth grass in huge strides. It was far

too lovely a day today to be trapped inside. Outside the gates of the college the streets of the town were busy, and people turned their heads as the three sprinted past them. Taking the shortest route from the college they cut across the streets, leaping over railing and darting across traffic causing strife as they went. The three were able to cover huge distances within mere minutes. Jumping impossibly high jumps rolling and running they carried on. They knew the streets well, had been born here, raised here.

It was their home.

They reached the edges of the town, where the buildings became fewer and more spread out. Now there were mostly just homes and a few corner shops. But they kept going.

About half a mile or so beyond the homes and past an industrial estate, was an abandoned building. It had been empty for many years now, and was secured by a chain link fence that ran all the way round. This used to be an old hotel, but the owners had run out of money and the building was never finished. It was just a structure of brick and stone now, the only part of the building that seemed in any sense recognisable as a hotel was the reception at the front. There was a faded red carpet on a finished floor and a half-oval desk in the middle, with little else within the smooth walls.

There was the smallest gap in the fence outside. Lucas glanced about them cautiously as he pulled back the chain links, making the hole big enough to crawl through. Reuben went in first, scrabbling through the dirt as he squeezed through the gap. Drake followed next, holding back the fence for Lucas to follow after him.

The building was the perfect place for what they planned to use it for, however it was dangerous. Drug dealers and criminal gangs often chose this as their favourite spot, and very occasionally the homeless. Though they stayed no longer than they had to, and only if it was quiet. It was said by some that people had been killed here, and it was said by others that there were bodies hidden in the area. Lucas had scoffed at this, dismissing it as nothing more than an urban legend. The hotel was well known of, and people liked to fabricate all kinds of crazy fairy-tales about it, including those that said it was haunted. It was rarely visited by ordinary people. However, the three that entered it now, were far from ordinary.

'Check the area' Lucas whispered to the others as they drew closer, quietening their footsteps. 'I'll go in first, you two scan around the building, and be careful of the windows. Someone may be looking out.'

Reuben and Drake nodded seriously. The three had visited this place often, yet it had become no safer for them. On one occasion several months back, Lucas had rounded a corner within the hotel and been jumped. The man that attacked had seriously injured Lucas, catching him by surprise. Had his brother not been there, Lucas would likely have been killed.

It took only minutes to search though every room, and once the three had determined the building was truly empty, they relaxed slightly.

It was filthy here, the typical used needles and fag ends lay about in many of the rooms amongst other rubbish, even the occasional empty bullet cartridge could be found. The three made their way up to one of

the higher levels and situated themselves in the largest room they could find, the one they were most used to. It was cleaner than the others, being brighter and more open. The sun in the sky was in the correct position to give them plenty of light while they worked. The floors were mere concrete and the edges of the open windows were sharp with brick and cement. It was chilly here, most of the building shut out the heat from the sun, yet the open windows and doorways let in the wind. Its howling could be heard throughout.

'Are you ready?' Reuben asked Drake.

'Sure am.'

Lucas situated himself in the usual position by the window and gazed outwards, scanning the environment.

The two took their positions on opposite ends of the room and readied themselves.

'Do you want to go first?' Reuben asked.

Drake cracked his knuckles eagerly in anticipation, sneering at Reuben smugly. He stepped back, making a flourishing movement with his hand. A dark light fell around him.

Magic.

He became shrouded in a dark purple shadow. Long metallic poles of dark metal criss-crossed before him forming a sort of barrier. These metallic things were blunt at one end, and pointed at the other, their sharp ends jutted backwards in a sort of cruel angular hook. They levitated in the air around him, hovering up and down gently.

A flicker of a grin crossed Reuben's face. He thought; then cast his own hand out.

From the ground at his feet lifted great vines, like the wide stems of huge deformed brambles, they twisted and curved in unnatural ways. They very slowly grew towards Drake, curling round themselves and twisting back they writhed, like their own existence caused them pain. They lifted up; touching the barrier Drake had created. Their contact created a series of flashing lights, a zapping sound, like an electrical current.

Lucas meandered around the pair and into the other room.

The vines drew back suddenly as if they had been struck. Calmly they crept forwards again. They were freakish; their relaxed persistent demeanour was almost frightening.

Lucas returned to the room and resumed his stance by the window again.

The metallic stakes lifted higher in the air, lowered again. They shot suddenly straight towards the vines, spinning so fast in the air that they became blurs. Screeching a high pitched sound so horrific it curdled the blood. The vines were struck, and faded out of existence with nothing more than a sigh.

Reuben stared coolly back at Drake, and summoned his next spell.

Lauralie was sitting cross-legged on the college grounds reading. She was learning about Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis. She found psychology to be a very interesting subject, and one she was very good at. Lauralie was a very pretty girl, born

with natural beauty. She had thick wavy ginger hair tied into pigtails, a rounded face, blue eyes and luscious lips. She dressed tastefully, yet modestly. But no matter what she wore, she always drew attention, from both genders.

It was an all around pleasant day, and the grass she sat on was dry and comfortable. The only distraction now being the small group not far away from her playing Frisbee and water pistol, a girl screamed as she was sprayed with water by her boyfriend. She stormed over and hit him on the shoulder when he complained he didn't do it.

Lauralie turned the page, trying her best to ignore their racket. Her friends were in their classes now, some had gone home; she had decided to stay here. College was a place she really liked, her secondary school had been a bad experience, but here people were nice.

She closed the book as she heard a throng of people jostling out of the buildings. Lessons had ended now, and the more eager ones ran out of the grounds, some jumping on skateboards. Lauralie slung her bag over her shoulder and joined the people as the majority walked calmly towards the gates.

From behind her someone watched; a male character dressed in black and startling red. His leather trousers were red, falling over pointed leather boots that had a slight heel. The rest of him was dressed in leather, and he had black hair spiked forwards. He had a slim angular face of perfect proportion and an appearance that would make most girls swoon. Everything about him screamed confidence and a large ego.

He stalked up behind her.

'Oh my goodness!' Lauralie jumped.

'Hey there.'

'Jacob! You scared the life out of me.'

She took steady breaths to calm her speeding heart while Jacob took up a pose before her, hands on hips.

'Well that was not my intention of course.' He flashed her his most charming smile.

She frowned at him.

'Say' he began casually. 'How do you feel about going out to see a film tonight?'

'With you?' Lauralie asked dubiously.

'Uh, yeah?'

'Sorry, I'm busy.'

'You said that last time.'

'And I'll say it next time.'

She walked past him. He rushed after her, falling into step by her side, walking with his hands in his pockets.

'You might enjoy yourself' he said.

'I might not.'

'You won't know until you try.'

'I suppose you're right.'

'So you'll come with me?'

'No.'

He sighed and made a noise of irritation.

'I have to go now' Lauralie said picking up her pace.

'Where are you going?' he asked looking suddenly and unnecessarily alarmed.

'Nowhere in particular.' She waved him away. 'I'll see you tomorrow' she beamed teasingly.

'I'll keep trying' he called after her slowing to a stop. He slumped his shoulders in disappointment,

unable to think of any other reason he had to follow her, and cursing himself for it.

'Good luck!' she called back merrily, turning from him and jogging away.

A seeping mass of gold light grew out of thin air, growing brighter. It was so bright that Drake was forced to shield his eyes. It shot towards Drake, rolling like waves in the ocean and completely shattering the defence Drake had created. The light fell.

'Alright' Drake soothed, 'I guess its hand to hand then.'

'I guess it is' Reuben smiled back.

Drake walked forwards, arms open, almost in a welcoming manner. Reuben curled his fists ready to strike.

'Hold it!' Lucas suddenly hissed.

The fire in Reuben's palms went out.

'What is it?' he asked nervously.

Lucas craned his neck. He spied a figure a distance away entering the grounds. She pulled back a section of the fence and clambered through.

Reuben and Drake came to the window.

'It's Lauralie' Drake said as he recognised her.

'Dammit' Lucas hissed, 'I told her not to come here. Doesn't she know it's dangerous?'

'She must have known we'd be here' Reuben said.

'No' Lucas retorted, 'she's guessing. She has no idea whether or not we would be here today. How many times does she come here when we're not?'

Drake slunk away from the window, sighing with disappointment that their games had been interrupted. 'I guess we'd better go meet her.'

They descended the stairs, meeting her at the reception as she was entering the building.

'I knew I'd find you here!' she cried triumphantly at the sight of them.

'No you didn't' Lucas droned, arms crossed. The three stopped before her. 'What the hell are you doing here Lauralie?' Lucas asked her impatiently.

Lauralie made a pouting face at him.

'There's no need to be like that' she huffed, 'I came down all this way to see you all.'

'Don't you know it's dangerous here?'

'Don't you?'

Lucas dismissed this with a wave.

'What are you doing here anyway?' she asked them all. 'You know I'm beginning to get suspicious, all this sneaking around. It's like you're holding a secret meeting or something. What's really going on?'

'Mind your own business' Lucas spat.

She stuck her tongue out and turned her back on him, speaking to the others like he no longer mattered.

'So do you wanna hang out or what?'

'Sure' Drake smiled at her. 'Come on, let's get out of here before a gang shows up and tries to kill us all.'

'Oh don't' she whined swatting at him. 'You know I hate it when you scare me like that.'

'It's true' Reuben added standing to her other side. 'In fact just last week, we saw a dead hobo.'

'Now you're making fun of me' Lauralie frowned in irritation.

Drake took her by the arm and led her away. Reuben shrugged at his brother as Lucas gave him a sceptical look.

'Come on, let's go, I suppose we've had enough fun for one day anyway' Reuben said.

'We barely even started' Lucas tutted. 'Ever since she found out we come here she's always trying to find us. It's annoying. Why doesn't she just go home?'

'Shhh' Reuben hissed. 'Don't say that, she might hear you.'

Lucas gave his brother a bored look, but said nothing.

'We're not the only ones who don't always want to go home' Reuben told him in a whisper.

'Why doesn't she hang out with her own friends?' Lucas complained.

'Who knows? Maybe she's attracted to us.'

Lucas groaned at his brother's idiot response as he walked away. Reuben smirked, and jogged to catch up with him.

'Do you think we can come back here tomorrow?'

'Probably' Lucas replied. 'We'll have to skip college again to avoid Lauralie though.'

Jacob knelt in the grass examining the strange markings in the dirt. The busy footpath of the park could be seen not too far away from where he was. There were mostly students in sight, taking a short cut home like he had been. But something had drawn him from the path and to this secluded spot. Everything had

seemed normal on this day, except for what Jacob was about to find.

He moved past the strange marking that looked like scuff marks from a boot, and further into the bushes. Jacob pushed back a pile of fallen leaves that looked like they had been deliberately collected together to hide something. He ran his fingers along the earth as he noticed something that glinted. Jacob brushed the dirt away with the back of his hand, gripping the object protruding from the vegetation he lifted it up, marvelling at it.

It seemed to be a staff of some kind. It was short and silver in colour, with wings that curved around a sort of dome at its head.

'What the hell…is this?'

He turned it over. It was engraved with an inscription which ran along its side.

Where I fight I live

'What the hell is that supposed to mean?'

Jacob turned it over to examine it again, when a sudden and sinister voice caught him off-guard.

'I see you've found my weapon.'

Jacob spun round in alarm; startled that he had been snuck up on like that, so engrossed he had been in his find.

He hesitated. His heart began to pace as he drew a deep breath. The man that stood before him was unlike any he had seen before. A normal human, but dressed in the most peculiar fashion.

He was dressed only in three long strips of cloth. One yellow, one orange and one red. They wound over his whole body, tied in knots here and there. The ends trailed loosely from his arms and knees. His eyes were both milky white.

'Who are you?'

'Who am I you ask?' the stranger replied.

He stepped towards Jacob, brushing back strands of hair delicately with a nail. They were six inches long and coloured a deep dark purple. From beneath his black fringe Jacob saw that there was an unusual sort of metallic plate that ran across the stranger's forehead, like a sort of bandana. From one side of the plate hanging down in three separate chains were a line of metallic stars.

The stranger moved closer, uncomfortably so. But shock and uncertainty had frozen Jacob to the spot. The man brushed Jacob's cheek with a nail, caressing him almost lovingly. Like a mother would to her son. Jacob felt a twinge in his stomach, a feeling of unease, was he safe here?

'War brings out my spirit' the stranger said. 'It's who I really am. It is who *you* will become.'

He smiled, but Jacob could read nothing into it. Was it kind? Was it cruel?

'My name is Venom. I have been watching you closely for many weeks now, and I think you are the one.'

'The one?' Jacob stammered, breaking his silence. He snapped back to himself, slapping the strangers hand away and stepping back.

'Don't touch me.'

Venom faltered for a moment, then regained his original demeanour. He smiled again, this time almost seductively.

'My dear boy, I bestow upon you a great gift. I think you will like it. You will see.'

Venom moved closer again. He embraced Jacob like a brother, holding him close.

'Now your eyes will truly be open.'

Jacob felt a surge of energy shooting through his body like an electric shock. He was enveloped in a great pain that ceased as fast as it had begun. His body felt alive, powerful, he felt liberation. Jacob suddenly saw an image then, a world he had never known. It was vast, with miles and miles of open plains and woodland, and near the coast was a great city made of stone. And at its heart, a mighty palace.

Jacob let out a gasp, stumbling back and away from Venom as he was released.

'I' Venom spoke, 'am a guardian, and I pass my powers onto you now.'

Jacob collapsed, weak and shaking.

'Farewell' the man said to him turning away. 'We will not meet again.'

'…but now I can't say anything because I'm not supposed to know. Honestly as much as I love her she can be a royal pain in the ass.'

'What is it with you girls?' Drake said to Lauralie in a disapproving tone.

'Oh come on' Lauralie winked cheekily at him. 'You've got your interests too. It's not easy being a girl, it's more political than you realise.'

'Mmmhmm' Drake replied.

It was getting late now. The warm summer's breeze had cooled and the sky was now darkening as the sun dipped just below the horizon. The town was winding down, and as they entered the culdasack they saw more cars parked in the driveways. Most people were at home, resting after a hard day's work or study, now they ate with their families. Simple quiet folk when they were at home, but out, like everyone else, life for them was hectic.

'Here's your house' Drake pointed.

Lauralie heisted, staring up at the modern white building, with its neat edges and tidy garden, it looked so tranquil.

'Thanks' she said quietly to Drake.

'We couldn't possibly leave you to walk alone in the dark.'

'I'm not afraid of the dark' she said smiling lightly. She glimpsed the brothers behind him; they waited now at the end of the drive.

Lucas stood with his arms crossed looking sour; Reuben at ease was tapping his foot. Reuben waved at her when she looked at him, and she waved back.

'Goodnight then' she said giving Drake a quick hug. 'And you'll get home safely yourself won't you? And you guys' she called to the brothers, 'see you in college tomorrow.'

'Ok bye' Lucas replied casually dismissive while Reuben waved jovially.

She nodded to them, turning and walking slowly towards the house. Drake returned to the others when she was inside.

'Get home safely she says' Drake laughed. 'If only she knew. I wonder what she thinks is going to happen to us?'

Reuben slapped him on the shoulder. 'We had better be getting back anyway, exams are coming up after all, don't want to be late to college because someone overslept.'

'Don't give me that' Drake huffed walking with him, 'you spend more time out of college than the rest of us.'

'Not just me. Lucas too.'

'Don't drag me into this.'

'That wasn't much of a defence' Drake said looking sceptically at Lucas. 'Don't pretend that you're not as bad as each other.'

But Lucas wasn't listening, his thoughts were far away.

She's starting to get nosey; it's only a matter of time before she finds out.

Reuben smirked at Drake. 'You know you shouldn't be so lovey with her, your girlfriend may start getting jealous.'

'I'm not *lovey!*' Drake protested. 'I'm just being friendly.'

'That's how it starts out' Reuben teased. 'For you friendly and flirting are the same thing.'

Drake punched him hard in the shoulder and the two began to wrestle. Lucas ignored them as he

continued his casual pace, watching Drake and his brother messing around as they teased each other.

It was lunchtime the next day in college, and Jacob had met up with his friends.

'Hey are you alright?' his friend Josh had asked him.

'Yeah I'm fine' Jacob answered.

'Sure, you look a little pale' his friend persisted.

Jacob gave him a cold hard stare.

'Whatever' Josh shrugged, 'not my problem.'

'Why do you have to always poke your nose into other people's business?' Alex said from across the table, jabbing an accusing finger in Josh's direction. 'Don't you know when to leave it alone?'

'Hey!' Josh argued. 'I said it's not my problem.'

The canteen now was brimming with people getting their lunch and talking loudly. As each person speaking contributed, it sounded as one continuous indistinguishable noise over the clatter of knives and forks. People cued at vending machines, some sat in large groups at the tables, a few on their own trying to revise.

'Have you just come in then?' Alex asked Jacob between slurps from his carton of orange juice.

'Sort of, I've only had one lecture…only half an hour though. Just a revision class. Listen, you wanna go outside?'

'Hold on I've nearly finished!' Josh shovelled the last few forkfuls of chips into the hole in his face. 'Ok, I'm done.'

They passed a small group of giggling girls on the way out, sitting around a table by the wall, some sitting on the table itself to see the others better.

'So what did he say?'

'Well he insisted on meeting me after class.' Lauralie answered her friend hesitantly, 'but I don't think I'll be there.'

'But why not?!' Christina demanded. 'He's totally hot.'

'But he's still with someone' Lauralie replied flatly.

'And? If you play your cards right he might pick you instead of her. Hell if you don't want him…'

'You can have him' Lauralie said over the laughter of her others friends beside her who carried on in their own discussion. 'He's not my type.'

'I don't know what your problem is' Christina replied sulkily. 'Everyone has a type, but not you. You don't like *anyone*.'

'Hey it's not like that' Lauralie argued. 'I like some people.'

'Really? Who do you like now? And they have to be in this college, they can't be famous.'

'Well…I can't really say' Lauralie blushed.

'Oh yeah?' Christina leaned towards her. 'Name me a single guy you stuck with for more than two months.'

'Ray…'

'Ray?'

'Yeah.'

'How long ago was that?' Christina asked.

'Uuuhhh.'

Christina grabbed her round the shoulders with an arm and shook her.

'Ooohhhh' she teased. 'You're terrible, you'll never change you know that?'

Outside the college, in a home not too far away, was a girl sitting inside, alone on her bed with her shoes on. She was seventeen in age and dressed all in black. Her black hair was cut into a bob, and she wore a short-sleeve black top and a long black skirt. Though pretty she had rather plain features, with large hazel eyes and a little button nose.

The bed in her room was against the wall next to the open window, and on the floor were several large boxes left open and half unpacked. They were filled mostly with old toys she had collected from her younger days. A faded multicolour train, a puppet and a pack of tarot cards worn from regular use was in one of the boxes. In one of the other boxes was a bookshelf dismantled, alongside old books of fairy tales and fantasy, her favourite picture of a meadow, and a bedside lamp made of seashells.

As a breeze lifted suddenly through the window, Ebony leaned on the sill, ignoring the rest of the room.

'Such a big town, she whispered, 'I'm not used to this kind of space.'

She saw a small group outside her house crossing the road. They were talking and laughing with one another. Ebony felt a twinge of jealously, and sadness.

She sighed and leant back, falling against the bed and staring up at the ceiling unmoving for some time. Then when she became uncomfortable, she rolled on her side, staring at the open box that contained her soft toys. Something stood out to her then, one of her favourite toys. It resembled a cat-like creature, with little wings and a long tail. It was something she won in a fare some time in her past, with someone she used to know. The toy carried many happy memories with it, that's why it was one of her favourites.

Ebony rose from the bed and took it. Holding it in her hands she stared at it intently.

'I wonder what's it's like to have some company again' she said.

Then just like that, as if it was the most normal thing in the world, the toy came to life.

First its ears twitched, then its whiskers. And then it sprang into animation, leaping out of her hands and into the air.

'Where am I?' the toy said at it landed on the bed.

'This is my bedroom' Ebony replied with a smile.

'Who are you?'

'I am your creator'

'My creator?'

'Yes.'

'….mother?' the toy asked, cocking its head in the most curious way.

Ebony smiled again. 'Yes, I suppose I could be called your mother.'

The toy turned its head and flew to the window, levitating in the air.

'It's nice outside' it said.

'Anything is nicer than in here.' Ebony huffed, turning away.

'You don't like it in here?' the toy asked returning to her side.

Ebony sighed forlorn and hugged her pillow.

'I'm *supposed* to like it in here, any *normal* person would.'

'You mean you're different?'

'I'm not an ordinary person' Ebony continued.

'Are you a guardian?' the toy asked her curiously.

Ebony gave the toy a glance.

Of course it knows what a guardian is; it's absorbed some of my thoughts and intelligence.

'No' Ebony explained, 'I'm something else.' She leaned towards the window again, watching the clouds go by. 'I don't want to be alone. Would you stay with me and keep me company?'

The toy stared at her back, expression never changing.

'I will.'

Downstairs were Ebony's parents by adoption. Ebony had never been told about her real parents, and in the end she had stopped asking.

They were both still unpacking boxes, squabbling amongst themselves about what should go where and

which box out of the many stacked up they should unpack next.

Ebony stood halfway down the stairs watching them. After several minutes of not being noticed she spoke.

'When's dinner ready?'

'Don't know' her adopted mother replied without looking up. 'Why don't you go outside and play, get used to this place. I'm sure it's lovely.' She ignored her further as she carried a stack of books across the room and placed them where she wanted.

'But I'm frightened' Ebony told her. 'I'm scared people want to hurt me.'

'Don't be stupid' her adopted father retorted, laughing at the absurdity of it. 'Why would you say a thing like that?'

'Because!' Ebony shouted in frustration.

Neither of them rose to it, which infuriated her even more. No matter what she said to them or how much she screamed, neither seemed to even notice.

'I'm going back to my room' she said, not caring for a reply.

'Could you take that box with you when you go?' her adopted mother asked.

But Ebony had already slammed her bedroom door shut.

'They couldn't see me?' the toy asked her, having followed her down and back to her room.

'No.' Ebony went over to the bed again and collapsed onto it. 'Only those with magic can see you.' She sat up and held her knees, shoes again on the bed, though she didn't care.

'Does that mean they can't see you either?' the toy asked coming to rest on her shoulder.

'It means they barely notice me.'

Ebony gazed out of the window again, like she had done so often already in the short time she had been here in this new home.

'I'm tired of running' she pleaded to the air. 'I just wish someone would save me from this cycle. I wish it so badly…'

Lucas stared at the card his brother had put down, placing his own on top of it.

'Snap' he shot, before Reuben had time to think.

'Dammit' Reuben hissed, balling his fist in annoyance.

'Come on' Lucas said throwing the rest of the cards down. 'We should be getting to our lecture now.'

'Yeah I suppose' Reuben huffed disinterestedly, picking up the cards. 'I'm not really in the mood though.'

'I know.' Lucas rose from the grass, brushing flecks of dirt from his jeans. 'But we can't miss too many classes; the lecturer won't be very pleased.'

'Screw him; he talks a load of rubbish anyway.'

'What are you talking about? You like physics.'

'Only at the best of times' Reuben said, putting the cards back in their box.

He handed Lucas the deck of cards as they made their way off. Reuben slinging the bag up his shoulder began strutting across the field.

'You know I think we should go away after the exams' Reuben started.

'Oh yeah? Where did you have in mind?' Lucas asked keeping in line with him as they walked.

Reuben fell silent.

'You don't know?'

'I just think it would be a nice break from this town' Reuben shrugged.

'I thought you liked this town.'

'I do' Reuben said defensively.

They walked up the steps side by side and entered the building, with its cheap carpeted floors and walls filled with pictures and diagrams that were all contributions from every subject. Science with pictures of atoms and body parts, psychology, ancient history, art, even Latin, one of the many languages offered by the college. There was a balcony with glass walls overlooking the lower level, and automatic doors leading to the other exits which opened as the brothers went past.

The corridors now were fairly busy, some of the classes had just finished and people were milling out of a few of the doors set in a row along the wall.

'Well what is it then?' Lucas questioned his brother.

'It's just…' Reuben struggled for words. 'There must be more out there.'

'Is that it?' Lucas scoffed. 'More than what?'

'More than this, here, what we do.' Reuben indicated everything around them as he spoke. 'Our powers certainly didn't come from around here. Not originally anyway. They must have come from somewhere else.'

'You mean another world?' Lucas offered, not bothering to keep his voice down.

'It's not impossible' Reuben shrugged, uncertain for a moment whether or not his brother would laugh at him. But he didn't.

Someone ahead of them in the corridor lit a cigarette, the match burning brightly.

'I mean since we first changed' Reuben explained, 'it's got me thinking, there must be a lot more out there that we don't know about.'

'You're probably right.'

As they talked they passed a small group hanging around outside one of the classrooms. One of the boys blew a cloud of smoke as they walked on. Then suddenly both brothers felt something. A sharp and sudden pain on their hand, like they had been burned. The brothers turned in unison, staring back down the corridor.

Jacob looked back, frozen as he noticed their stares. He stood as part of a circle with his friends. In his mouth was a burning cigarette, in his hand, a shrivelled black match.

Reuben glanced to his brother as Lucas gave Jacob a calculated expression. He then turned and continued walking, Reuben followed suit.

'There must be more out there than just us and Drake' Lucas went on, as if nothing had happened.

'And more keep appearing' Reuben added.

Chapter Two

Monster in the Park

It was late by the time Jacob left the college after attending a revision class. The college was mostly empty now, and Jacob was one of the last to leave. The lecturer gave him a nod as he made his way gradually out of the computer room. His bag heavy with books made it uncomfortable to carry, and he switched it from one hand to the other often.

The corridors were eerily quiet. It was strange to be in the college and see it so empty, it almost felt unnatural. His footsteps echoed in the deserted building, and he felt a tingle down his spine as he passed the art classes, seeing a model of a young boy with a crow's head outside one of the doors. It seemed nothing but a trivial amusement in the day, now when the place was deserted; it stood out like a freakish shadow all in black.

'Creepy' he whispered to himself, averting his gaze.

He thought he was alone as he exited the building, however just as the automatic doors slid shut behind him, Jacob was stopped short. One of the brothers blocked his path. Lucas, he gave Jacob a cold hard stare.

'We need to talk.'

Jacob was used to that tone, mostly from the girls he dated. He heard movement behind him. Glancing back he saw that it was Reuben. The brothers as always, working together.

'So this is where you live.' Jacob absorbed the surroundings critically.

The apartment was small and modest. The first room they entered was the sitting room, bearing only neutral colours. It opened onto the tiny kitchen and the hallway that led to the rest of the apartment. Glass double doors led out onto a pitiful balcony with dying plants, and below was a filthy alleyway filled with rubbish and bad smells.

'It's nice' Jacob said.

'Don't be sardonic' Lucas droned. 'We didn't bring you here for you courtesies and compliments.'

He dumped his bag on the floor and slumped into one of the large sofas, sinking into it. Reuben trailed away into the kitchen, leaving Jacob standing uncomfortably in the middle of the sitting room.

'Sit' Lucas drawled flatly, and Jacob did so. Descending in one of the armchairs and eyeing the room again from this new perspective.

Everything in the room was designed with a modern feel, and everything was neat and tidy.

'A place for everything and everything in its place' Lucas recited, watching Jacob as his eyes rolled around the room. 'That's how our bitch mother likes to put it.'

He immediately put his shoes up onto the clean glass coffee table.

Reuben returned to the room a few minutes later carrying three mugs of tea, frowning at his brother's feet.

'Lucas what are you doing?'

'What I want for a change. Now sit down, I don't want a lecture.'

Reuben sat beside his brother on the sofa. Leaning forwards he slid one of the mugs across the table towards Jacob. Jacob stared at the sloshing liquid uncertainly.

'It's not poisoned if that's what you're thinking' Reuben said, drinking from his own mug. 'It's only tea.'

Jacob picked up the mug, drinking from it tentatively. It was sweeter than he was used to, and still piping hot.

'Why did you bring me here?' he asked putting the mug down.

'Because there is something we need to tell you' Lucas replied reclining back into the sofa.

'Oh yeah?' Jacob swirled the contents of the mug. 'How many sugars did you put in here Reuben?'

'Five.'

'Five!'

'Hey' Reuben shrugged, 'we need the sugar rush; we use a lot of energy. Sorry it's just a habit.'

'Energy? Doing what?' Jacob sighed. 'Or would I rather not know? Anyway what was it you wanted to tell me?'

'Earlier today' Lucas said, 'when you burned yourself on that match, we felt it.'

'*Felt* it?'

'You're a guardian now' Reuben added. 'That means you're one of us.'

A swirl of emotion rose through Jacob, and he thought back to that strange man he had met in the park. His voice was running through his head.

'I, am a guardian, and I pass my powers onto you now.'

'You've heard of guardians too?' Jacob breathed in awe. 'And I thought I was going crazy.'

'We've not just heard of them' Lucas groaned, as if he was already bored with having to explain. 'We *are* guardians, we've met other guardians. Not many mind you.'

'Why?'

'Do you think that if guardians were that common you wouldn't have met one before now?' Lucas tutted and turned his head away, tapping his foot on the table. A habit of irritation.

'So what happened?' Reuben took over. 'You've not been a guardian for very long obviously. Where did you get your powers?'

Jacob bowed his head, thinking back to that stranger, who had called himself Venom. How strange he had dressed. How strange he had acted.

'I met someone yesterday' Jacob began. 'I've never seen anyone like him before, like he was from another world.'

Reuben stiffened, glancing to his brother beside him. Lucas wore an expression unreadable.

'You said you felt the match burn me' Jacob hurried on, swiftly changing the subject at the brother's reaction. 'What did you mean by that?'

'Guardians can feel other guardians around them to varying degrees. Their pain…strong emotions…When you burnt yourself holding the match, both Reuben and I felt it in our own hands. Like we were holding the match ourselves.'

'Really?'

Lucas seemed unconcerned as he stirred his tea, chasing the end of the spoon around the mug with a fingertip. 'You said you met a guardian yesterday. Where was this?'

'In the park…near here…' Jacob trailed off, gazing out the window. 'He said he passed his powers onto me.'

Reuben grinned slyly. 'How exciting' he sighed. 'I remember the day I first became a guardian, so does Lucas. Right Lucas?'

'Hmm' his brother replied.

'I remember it like it was yesterday' Reuben said. 'I felt weak suddenly, terribly terribly weak, and then strong, like I had never felt before. It was good.'

'Who were the guardians that gave you your powers?' Jacob asked the brothers.

They faltered at this, glancing to one another. Lucas was the one to answer.

'We are…' he was silent in thought for a few moments. 'Different…' he chose, 'than other guardians. We've asked Drake and other guardians we've met before how they first became, and they all say that they

were given their powers by another guardian, those who were older and weaker.'

'Drake is a guardian?' Jacob asked incredulous.

'Don't interrupt. The guardians who pass on their powers tend to be handicapped in some way,' Lucas went on. 'Something that prevents them from being at their best.'

Jacob thought back to the guardian he had met, and remembered his milky white eyes.

'When a guardian doesn't want to be a guardian anymore' Lucas continued, 'they pass their powers onto another. One they think is worthy, someone who matches their character. Someone they've grown fond of. And then they themselves retire.'

'And what does a guardian do exactly?' Jacob asked the older brother.

'The truth is we don't know' Lucas replied reluctantly. 'We've been guardians for many years now, perhaps ten or so. And we live here and carry on with our lives, occasionally meeting others like us who come and go. Drake is the only one who stayed when others have gone. When we were young, we used to believe there was something great for us out there, something big that would happen, some adventure.'

Lucas lifted both his hands before him, staring down at them. He flexed his fingers slowly, and the air between his hands began to glow. From nothing grew a beautiful blue light. Bright and sparkling, it grew larger and more fabulous the more Lucas teased it. 'Like some kid I believed once that there was more to this life, we both did. But in the end, all it came down to was a child's imagination.' He closed his fists, and the light

snapped out of existence. 'We keep our magic secret. If anyone other than a guardian were to see this, it would drive them mad. It's like there's some sort of barrier placed upon *normal* people. No one notices it as long as it's in the corner of their eye, but if they were to look at it directly…well, put it this way. You wouldn't want it to happen. Trust me.'

Reuben leaned forward, speaking to Jacob now in a whisper. 'Our mother once saw-'

'Shhh!' Lucas hissed. 'That's none of his business. Don't you know when to keep your mouth shut?' He balled his fists, gritting his teeth and glaring at the wall away from his brother.

'How are you different from other guardians then?' Jacob asked hastily, ignoring Reuben's discomfort.

'When other guardians we have met gained their powers from older guardians who willingly gave them their magic, people they spoke to and interacted with, we knew no one.' Reuben glanced at his brother. 'My brother and I received our powers, one shortly after the other. On both occasions it happened in the day, with no warning.' Reuben shook his head. 'But we saw no one, no guardian, nothing. It irks me even to this day, but there is nothing either of us can do to solve that mystery, even back when it first happened. It's not like there was anyone we could have asked.'

'I, am a guardian, and I pass my powers onto you now.'

'How many guardians are there then' Jacob asked them. 'And how come I've never seen them before?'

'Were you not listening?' Lucas said breaking his silence. 'Guardians come and go occasionally though

they aren't common, and you've never seen them before because you cannot see magic. Unless you're a guardian. Which you now are.'

'So I can use magic?' Jacob said uncertainly. 'Like you?'

'Like both of us.'

'How?'

Lucas cocked his head, considering Jacob. 'You will know when you are ready. Each guardian has specific abilities, specific magic that they can perform. It will become as natural to you as breathing. Trust me. What was the name of the guardian who gave your powers to you?'

'Venom.'

Lucas nodded. 'A good name. Many new guardians take on the name of the one who gave them their magic, and so the name lives on.'

Jacob was silent in thought, hardly daring to believe what was happening to him. 'God this all seems so surreal' he said, putting down his steaming mug. 'I feel like this is all a dream.'

'Imagine my surprise when I fell from my swing and fire shot from my hands' Reuben said. 'And I didn't even burn.'

Jacob lifted the mug again; the steam was hot against his face as he took another sip.

I, am a guardian, and I pass my powers onto you now.'

'He said I was *the one*.'

'The one he chose to pass on his powers to.' Lucas spoke as if he had heard this all before. Like old gossip.

'But why choose me?'

'Already been told' Lucas sang.

'He probably picked you because your personality was similar to his' Reuben explained, 'or he liked you for another reason. Maybe you resemble someone he cares about. Whatever the reason he was sure of his choice, if a guardian wants to pass on their powers to another, they want to know the person first. He's probably watched you for days.'

'Look' Lucas leant forward putting his mug down on the table. 'It doesn't really matter why he picked you. What's done is done. You're a guardian now.'

'What powers do I have?' Jacob asked.

'Each guardian has different magic' Reuben told him. 'It's like a signature which defines the individual.'

Jacob hummed thoughtfully, biting his lip.

'You are one of us now' Lucas clarified. 'We guardians should stick together.'

'It's strange' Jacob smiled nervously. 'I've never really spoken to you two before. Never had a reason to.'

'Isn't it funny where life takes you eh?' Lucas said sardonically. 'When I was young I wanted to be an archaeologist. I loved dinosaurs.'

'So…' Jacob digressed as he surveyed the apartment again. 'You live here with your mother I presume. What about your father?'

'To say we live with our mother wouldn't be entirely accurate' Lucas told him. 'She's out so much of the time she barely lives here. We don't know where she goes, when she's coming back, or even what she does for work.'

'Probably whoring' Reuben mumbled.

'In fact I think it's fair to say that *we* own the place' Lucas continued. 'We certainly spend more time here than she does.'

'And as for a father' Reuben added. 'We've never met him. Don't even who he is or even if we have the same father.'

'So…where's your mother now?'

'Don't know' Lucas dismissed. 'She has these bursts of anger sometimes, and for the thousandth time she's walked out on us. Last time she didn't come back for months.'

'So you're here alone?' Jacob asked.

'Are you worried about us?' Lucas questioned with a smirk.

'No.'

'It's better without her anyway.' Lucas stretched his muscles, yawning and clicking his fingers. 'You should probably be going now. We've told you everything we wanted to tell you. You should go before your family begin to worry where you are.'

Once Jacob was gone, Lucas let out a heavy sigh. 'Reuben' he said. 'I think life is about to change for us very soon.'

'I think you're right.'

Reuben stood and groaned at the room. 'We'd better keep an eye out for her in case she comes back when we don't want her to.'

'That bitch…'

Reuben relaxed his body, watching his brother still seated with his feet on the table.

'You're not going to get yourself hurt again are you?' Reuben asked.

Subconsciously Lucas's hand moved to his left arm. She had broken it many years ago when he was younger, defending Reuben over something he had done wrong.

'We're older now' Lucas answered quietly. 'She can't hurt us anymore.'

Outside in one of the parks within the town, was the most unusual group one could have seen, gathered together around a child's climbing frame. There were four of them, and they paid no heed to any of the people around them, who neither saw them, nor heard them. There was a group of teenagers by the swings drinking and smoking, and the occasional passerby late home from work. It was a typical scene at the park, save for this group.

There was a man, a mother, a daughter and an aberrant.

The hour was waning, and with every passing minute, the stars grew brighter, the evening star taking centre stage.

'It's here' the aberrant rasped in his low harsh voice, he whipped his tail in agitation and flexed his mighty wings 'It's very close now.'

There was a sudden uproar of laugher from the swings as one of the boys attempted and failed to do a handstand on the swing itself. The aberrant jerked his head up, snarling at them and their disruption.

'Do you think the others have found it yet?' the mother asked.

The man twirled a strand of his fiery red hair between his fingers.

'Not yet' he replied, 'we would know if it was found. They still don't know yet where it is. But the problem is, neither do we.'

'I wonder who will reach it first' the daughter voiced, passing a hand over the orb she held before her. The sphere glowed; within it were many beautiful colours, though all of them were dark. 'I fear things will not go well.'

The next day

'Hey check out the new girl.'

Lauralie raised her head at the sound of whispering from her classmates, scanning the room briefly, the new girl didn't take long to spot. Lauralie saw the girl sitting two rows behind from her. She was dressed all in black, with medium length black hair. Lauralie found herself thinking the girl to be very pretty, but immediately decided that she didn't like her at all. The way she sat and postured gave Lauralie the feeling that she was very arrogant. The girl rested her chin on steepled fingers, almost sulkily. Her expression was vacant and her eyes were cold.

Lauralie turned back to her desk.

'What's she like?' the whispered conversation continued nearby.

'I don't know. I heard her name is Rhian. She's not from around here, apparently she just moved in recently.'

Lauralie returned her attention back to her work. A picture she had been drawing in pastel of a woman, floating on a lake in a rowing boat with her child. It was shortly afterwards the bell rang, and people started filing out of class. Lauralie dusted her hands off on her jeans, gathering together her pencils and sketch books.

'I'll see you later Christina' she told her friend.

Christina winked cheekily at her, waving as she danced away. Lauralie left the classroom alone once she had packed up her things, swinging her bag over her shoulder and strolling out into the corridor. It was seconds later another one of her friends caught up with her.

'Hey Lauralie!'

She squeaked in shock as her friend pounced on her, jumping from behind and grabbing her shoulders.

'Why does everyone have to frighten me like that all the time?' Lauralie whined.

'Well' her friend Alice said slyly, clinging to her. 'You're so easily startled, it's hard not to make fun of it. You're like a little lamb.' Alice gleamed, looking much like a cougar standing before its prey.

Lauralie hooked her arm though Alice's as they walked together.

'So where are you heading?' Alice asked. 'Do you have another lecture to go to?'

'No I'm finished now.'

'Great' Alice beamed. 'I'm finished too. Actually I was finished ages ago. I wanted to wait for you because me and the others are going over Kirsty's now. Do you want to come?'

'Sure' Lauralie said perking up.

'Great' Alice said again. 'The others are already there. I told them I would wait for you.'

'I know where her house is' Lauralie laughed.

'Yeah but I wanted to walk with you.'

Lauralie squeezed her friends arm tightly. 'You're so good to me Alice.'

'I know right?'

They walked slowly together, heading out of the college grounds.

'Did you hear the word on the street?' Alice asked.

'What word?'

'The brothers are coming to town!'

'Eh?'

'They're well known street dancers, entertainers' Alice rambled on. 'They've been travelling round together for the last year doing their thing and now they're coming home again. They're going to be putting on a show. I hear they're pretty good at it, though I've never seen them myself.' She cast a sideways glance at Lauralie, grinning happily. 'I've heard they're both pretty handsome.'

'If you haven't seen them before how do you know they're any good?' Lauralie asked.

'My little sister is friends with their little sister. She's told me about them. Anyway I was wondering if you wanted to come along to see them. Me and the others are going together, you can bring a friend or two of your own if you wanted. The more the merrier, that's what they say.'

Street dancing? Lauralie thought. *Oh please, what a ridiculous thing to do, go around prancing in different towns making a fool of yourself. Dancing is for girls and gays…*

Lauralie smiled sweetly at her friend.

'That sounds brilliant, I'd love to come.'

'Great!' Alice beamed squeezing her arm excitedly. 'Who will you bring?'

'I could ask Drake, he might be interested.'

'Drake?' Alice made a comical face. 'Is he your…?'

'Friend' Lauralie finished. 'Just a friend.'

Alice sniffed disdainfully. 'You make me jealous to know that? You have so many boyfriends.'

'They're not my boyfriends' Lauralie scowled.

'Alright, boys that are friends' Alice corrected.

'That's better.'

'Anyway, Kirsty's got a film to watch tonight if you're not expected to be home.'

'That sounds fun' Lauralie replied. 'I wasn't going home tonight anyway.'

It was in the library that Jacob revised now, free from his lectures, he sat now with his friends Josh and Alex.

'Macro. Computer science. A set of instructions that is represented in an abbreviated format. In short' Jacob said.

'Say whaaaa…?' Josh raised an eyebrow.

'It's a pattern that specifies how a certain input sequence should be mapped to a replacement input sequence according to a defined procedure.'

'In English?'

'It carries out a sequence of operations intended by the user….you record a set of actions on the computer' Jacob sighed patiently.

'Oh I see.'

Jacob closed his book, frowning at his friend across the table.

'I'm sure glad at least one of us understands this stuff' Josh huffed. 'I just can't get my head around macros. They're so confusing.'

'Well you'd probably understand it better if you actually listened to the lecturer' Jacob replied.

'I can't help it' Josh argued. 'I just switch off. As soon as anyone mentions the M word I zone out.'

Jacob shook his head.

And you know our lecturer has the most boring voice' Josh went on. 'It's enough to put anyone to sleep.'

'Well at least you're doing better than me' Alex chipped in looking up from his books. It was the first time he had spoken in a while. 'I'm doing ancient history. I can't even remember what we're supposed be doing. Something about the Catiline Conspiracy and a man called Superbus.'

'The Catiline Conspiracy?' Josh said. 'Nothing *actually* happened. It was a *supposed attempt*' Josh stressed these words as he spoke. 'To overthrow the roman republic.'

'Wait didn't Superbus live in a different time to Catiline?' Alex asked.

'You should know dumbass' Josh returned, 'you're in my class.'

'So who was this Catiline guy anyway?' Jacob cut in before an argument began.

'He was a roman politician.'

'Wait, did you say Superbus…?' Jacob asked, realising what a strange name it was. He hesitated then, noticing three figures standing just outside the doors of the library watching him, he didn't even hear his friend's response. The three figures moved away.

'Jacob? Are you alright?' Alex glanced around to see what Jacob was looking at, but the three had already gone. 'What are you looking at?'

'What is it?' Josh asked. 'You look…nervous.'

'I'm fine' Jacob lied. He shifted, trying to get back to his work, but found that he could not. 'I've got to go' he said shortly after, rising to his feet.

'Why? Hey wait a minute!'

But Jacob ignored the both of them, heading out of the library and into the beautiful sun. The car park was in view from outside the library, and Jacob could see the three figures waiting for him there.

Lucas, Reuben and Drake. They were all leaning against the wall at the back of the car park; in formation, they all eyed him like hawks.

Jacob felt a great weight descend upon him. The air suddenly felt heavy and his chest tightened. He took a deep breath, taking a step towards them, he began to walk.

Their eyes never left him as he approached them. Behind him standing just outside the library, Josh and Alex now watched. Jacob paused to glance back at them; then turned to face the three again. Lucas pushed himself off the wall and straightening up.

'Welcome aboard' Lucas said seriously.

'Things are going to change for me from now on' Jacob said. 'Aren't they?'

Lucas cocked his head in response, his eyes gleaming.

'You've past the point of no return my friend' Lucas told him.

'I still haven't been able to use magic…but…I feel different since that day.'

'The day you met Venom?' Reuben asked.

Jacob thought of Alex and Josh, wondering how he was going to explain to them what was happening. But he decided then that it didn't matter. He didn't need to explain anything; he couldn't, even if he wanted.

'Your magic *will* come to you' Lucas assured him. 'When you are ready.'

'How long will it take?'

Lucas shrugged. 'Everyone is different.'

He extended a hand towards Jacob.

Magic Jacob thought. *Will this be a gift, or a curse?*

Jacob looked down at Lucas' hand, and extended his own. Lucas grasped his forearm tightly, either side of him, Reuben and Drake smiled.

Jacob was led away by the three, as his friends no more, watched.

They headed out of the town, and towards the abandoned hotel where the brothers and Drake so often practiced their magic. But on this day they saw something strange. Something not even the brothers had seen before. All four of them slowed to a stop, staring in disbelief.

It was a black creature, large in size with an entire head that welded into one colossal horn. Its mouth held a neat row of splintered teeth, and it walked on all fours.

They all watched as it walked casually past; its only acknowledgment of them was a brief glance as it continued on its way.

Lucas gasped as he recognised it, suddenly realising what it was. He uttered one word.

'Aberrant.'

'Where are they?' the woman hissed, glancing all around her as if what she feared might appear at any moment.

The man beside turned to her, brushing her cheek with the back of his hand.

'Be calm Li my sweet, they pose no real harm to us.'

'But there are more of them than us' she argued.

'So?' Kreas replied. 'If they appear, we'll kill them.'

'Easier said than done.'

'We can defend our own in a fight' Kreas said stretching. 'As well as they can at least.'

'But what if they find it before us? You know they'll flee as fast as they can back to the king, how do we get it back once the king has it? We would be no match against his men.'

'Well' Kreas drawled, 'we had better make sure we get it before they do.'

He raised his hood, glaring at a passerby.

'I can't wait to get away from here. I don't like this place.'

'Me neither' Li replied. 'The air here is so….polluted.'

'A silly thing to complain about. We're in a busy town' Kreas teased. 'You're just a soft country girl.'

'You be quiet' Li snapped. 'You hate it here too.'

Kreas purred dangerously, his eyes glinting.

'It won't be long now' he told Li. 'It's still in this town; our chase is coming to an end.'

'Then perhaps at last we can rest.'

'Rest?' came a third voice.

The pair glanced towards the man that had spoken. He turned and strode away, the hem of his ankle length white coat lifted on his heels as he marched.

'Kreas, Li, come.'

Kreas obeyed, snarling at a passerby who moved too close. Li fell into the footsteps of the man who commanded her, and together they followed their master, through the streets.

Kreas shoved aside a man who moved too close. The man stumbled, glancing around to see what had pushed him, but finding nothing.

'Control yourself Kreas' the master spoke calmly to him. 'You let your anger get the better of you.'

'Sorry master' Kreas replied. 'I've become short of temper since we came to this town. We've been here for far too long as it is.'

'We've not been here that long' Li argued.

'One minute is by far too long' Kreas snapped. 'I hate this place…as much as you do Li.'

'So you keep saying' the master replied. 'If I hear you say it again, I'll make you wish you hadn't.'

Kreas quickly fell silent.

'Where are you taking us master?' Li asked.

'You will see.'

A short time later and the master had brought them to the edge of the town. He turned to them and spoke.

'I want you to circle the entire town, make sure she is still here as you think. There is something that's keeping it here, and I want to know what.'

'Maybe the others have found it' Li replied.

'If that's the case it would have vanished by now' Kreas argued.

'The others have not found it' the master spoke over them. 'I still sense her magic near, and it is strong. You will circle the entire town to make sure she is still here as I suspect, then you will create a net of magic to trap her, before she has a chance to escape.'

'Sounds like fun' Kreas sneered.

'Just go' the master sighed, waving them away. 'And be quick about it.'

The two bowed their heads obediently, transforming into their beastly selves. They were gone in an instant, running on all fours in opposite directions around the edge of the town.

That night

Rhian heard a disturbance in the darkness outside. It was either very late or very early, she didn't know which, but it was a strange and frightening sound that

had brought her so abruptly out of a deep sleep. Rhian tensed with eyes wide open. Frozen for a moment she listened hard. The town so late at night was usually quiet now, even the clubs were closed this early in the week, but there was a noise, something out of place that disrupted the usual silence of the night. She sat up and threw back the duvet, grabbing the metal bar which leant against her bedside table. Stepping lightly she crossed the room, bare feet slapping on the smooth wooden floor. Rhian threw the double doors to the balcony open and let the wind catch her hair. The chill of the night breeze was refreshing, waking her tired mind further. Besides from the chirping of the strange insects of the night; and the shrill noise of the bats as they chased the moths that danced in the streetlights, there was another sound.

Rhian tiled her head, listening hard, the metal bar raised in both her hands.

There!

A screeching howl that echoed through the town, then another one shortly after coming from another direction nearby. There was more than one, likely there were several. Rhian glanced back into her room, realising her parents would not be able to hear the sound. Nor would anyone else who was not a guardian. She turned back towards the night, leaping atop the railings of the balcony with the balance of a gymnast. Jumping to the house immediately next door and running over the tiles, they clattered together as they took her weight. She covered several houses in a matter of minutes, and woke no one. She kept running until she eventually found the source of the disturbance.

They were gathered together in a small group by the side of one of the houses several streets away. Tearing into the rubbish bins and the dumpster and fighting amongst each other like typical scavengers. Several of the bins were tipped over, with the heads of the creatures buried within as they rooted around for anything they could find. Occasionally one more dominant than the others would snap at an omega and push him back with teeth bared.

Rhian sneered at their savagery as she looked down on them from the rooftop; disgusted by the way they fought over meagre scraps thrown away.

What worthless creatures she thought. *These the world would be better off without.*

'Demon scum' she spoke aloud.

Several of them looked up suddenly at the sound of her voice, growls rising from deep within their throats as they searched for the source. Rhian spun the metal pole in a hand and leapt down from the building. She fell right in the middle of the circle of the creatures, rubbish crunching under her feet as she landed. They scattered, not out of fear but out of surprise, many had bolted but no more than a few feet away. When they realised what they saw was not bigger than themselves, they slunk forwards to challenge the intruder. The only thing these beasts truly feared was another aberrant bigger than themselves.

These were scrawny and deformed looking beasts, with feet resembling that of a chicken's that were malformed and twisted. Some bore exaggerated spikes of bone that protruded sharply through the skin from the shoulders and spine. Others had upwards pointing

horns, long thin tails and skeletal wings. And some had two narrow heads on the end of two long necks, each acting independent of the other. In this one small area were several different species.

One of the two headed aberrants closest to her lifted its head snarling, and was immediately met by a swing from the metal pole. One head was thrown to the side, cheek bones and jaw broken on impact. The other head snapped backwards as Rhian struck it from below, swinging her weapon as if it were a golf club. The aberrant screeched in pain, writhing on the ground, trying desperately to escape her. Another aberrant roared at her in a display meant to intimidate. Rhian translated it as an invitation. Standing with its back legs up on the dumpster and its front legs on the ground Rhian lunged forwards. Stabbing the beast in the chest, the metal pole went right through the creature's thin skin, stopping its heart instantly.

The remaining beasts fled, scrambling away in a fit of raw terror. Aberrants they may be but they were still driven by instinct, and knew when they were beaten. They would rather flee than die.

'Cowards' Rhian spat.

She let the end of the pole slide through her fingers until it touched the ground, blood still dripping from the end. Rhian observed the animals she had killed. Their pupils were white, their skin black, and their manes red.

'Juveniles' Rhian said to herself. 'They don't know how to fight yet.'

The puddle of blood by the head of the first one she struck was rapidly growing, its jaw cocked sideways

and the bones in its cheek caved in. The second one was still twitching.

Rhian tapped her foot, and brought the metal pole up to rest on her shoulder.

'I've not seen aberrants for many years; I wonder what they're doing here?'

The next morning (Saturday morning)

The screen of the mobile flashed blue as it vibrated across the bedside table, coming dangerously close to the edge. Eleanor moaned in agitation, slowly waking up from her wonderful dream and feeling regret that she was already forgetting it. She furrowed her brow angrily at the loud and overly happy sound of her ringtone. Rolling over she pushed herself up with a groan, catching the mobile before it fell off the table and landed on the floor. She flipped it open.

'…Hello?'

'Hey Eleanor, how are you?'

'Drake?'

She sat bolt upright, suddenly wide away.

'Drake! It's so good to hear from you, how are you?'

'Are you still in bed?' Drake said incredulous. 'I should have known.'

Eleanor groaned again, turning to look at the clock on her bedroom wall.

'It's only seven thirty' she spoke in her morning voice.

'I was up an hour ago' Drake chirped happily.

'Doing what?'

'Revising.'

'Don't be stupid.'

She rolled back into bed, withdrawing into her blankets like a hermit into its shell.

'Sian and I had a sleep over; we were up late last night watching horror.'

'Oh yeah?' Drake replied. 'Just the sort of thing you want to watch before you go to bed. Did you have any nightmares by any chance?'

'There was this really horrible bit in one where someone drives a lawnmower over someone else's face!' Eleanor said dramatically, ignoring Drake's question.

'That's horrible.'

'That's what I said. There were so many jumpy bits in it, I had to ask Sian to tell me when they were coming up so I wouldn't get scared…because she's seen it before.'

'What's the point in that?' Drake scoffed. 'I thought you watch horror because you like getting scared.'

'No. I watch horror because it's exciting. But it didn't work anyway because Sian kept deliberately forgetting to tell me when the jumpy bits were coming up.'

'So you had fun then?' Drake asked.

'Sure did.'

'Who's that on the phone?' Sian asked yawning as she sat up beside to her. 'Hey you're taking all the blankets! No wonder my arse is cold!'

'It's Drake' Eleanor told her.

'Drake?' Sian rolled over to the other side of the bed, resting with her head on her hands. 'Could you ask him if Lucas is still coming tomorrow?'

'Why don't you ask him yourself?' Eleanor said. 'He's your boyfriend.'

'I can't speak to Lucas at the moment because my phone is broken' Sian sighed. 'And I forgot his number.'

'Fine' Eleanor sighed dramatically. She spoke to Drake again.

'Sian wants to know if Lucas is coming down tomorrow.'

'Yeah, we both are' Drake replied.

Eleanor gave a thumbs up to Sian, who turned away with a smile and went back to sleep, taking most of the blankets with her.

'I'd better go now anyway' Drake said.

'Awww?'

'Sorry babe, I'm just going out, and anyway you should have your breakfast.'

'I suppose, where are you off to then?' Eleanor asked.

'Just going to town, apparently there's going to be a show there today, two street dancing brothers.'

'Cool' Eleanor said perking up. 'Well I hope you have fun.'

'You too' Drake answered. 'Whatever it is you two are doing today.'

'I love you Drake' she smiled.

'I love you too.'

He ended the call.

The girl slowed to a stop, glancing fearfully around her and wondering which direction the danger was going to come from, and which direction she should run to next. Clutching the hem of her white dress, palms sweating now, she noticed an insect hover above her head, it was a dragonfly.

They were very close now, those that hunted her.

The dragonfly darted back and forth quickly, before whizzing away in another direction. The girl followed at a run, barefoot across the skate park and weaving in out of the people who all saw through her, completely oblivious to her presence.

She fled the scene, and moments later, her pursuers appeared.

They met in the centre of the skate park, appearing from different directions.

'Where is she?' the black creature called Kreas hissed, crawling on all fours, red eyes gleaming pupil-less.

'We've lost her' his companion realised with a howl of fury. Li sniffed the concrete feverishly, crouching close to the ground on her long legs. 'That way!' the canine beast cried.

'Stop right there' commanded another voice.

Li growled in acknowledgement at the newcomers, white eyes narrowing at her adversaries. They were freakish, pupil-less, like her companions.

'We will not let you hurt her' the guardian ordered. He stood tall and proud alongside his own companions, a girl with long blue hair, and an aberrant, with a figure shaped like a man, but with black skin and large bat-like wings.

'The longer you stall us the further she runs' Li informed him.

The tall guardian averted his attention, brushing his fingers through his fiery red hair as if in disinterest. He let his hand drop, speaking now to the youngest of the three, the blue haired girl.

'Siren. See if you can find her' he said. 'Don't lose her trail. We're so close now.'

The young guardian clutched tightly the orb she held in her hands. She left her companions side, jogging she headed in the direction the one dressed in white had fled. The winged guardian watched her go silently.

'Indigo' Kreas purred. 'You are missing one in your company.'

The slinking black creature before them chattered happily. His red eyes laughing at them in mockery.

The red haired guardian glanced behind him towards the winged guardian.

'Where is she?' he muttered under his breath.

'She seems to be preoccupied lately' the winged guardian answered in a flat tone.

'With something more important?' Indigo replied exasperated. He turned back to the creatures before him. 'We are evenly matched' he declared.

'Or so it would seem' Li replied smoothly.

'This isn't how it should be' Kreas told them, daring to crawl closer. 'We should be working together.'

'To kill her?' Indigo cried. 'We are trying to protect her.'

'Is that right?' the slinking creature said leering. 'And what do you think the king will do with her if you bring her to him?' he asked the red haired guardian.

'He will keep her safe' Indigo replied.

'Will he now?' Kreas cackled. 'Just ask yourself…do you truly believe that, or do you just *want* to believe it?'

The winged guardian behind Indigo began to groan, clutching his chest, body hunched over.

'Looks like one of you at least is in no position to fight' Li remarked.

Indigo clenched his fists, jaw tightening.

'Let us not shed blood here' Li went on. 'We don't want to do ourselves an injury' she gleamed sardonically. 'At least not if we can help it. Not *yet* anyway.'

She ran away then, after Siren and in the same direction the girl in white had fled. Indigo called for them to stop, though his efforts were futile, he knew he was no match for the two of them, not on his own at least.

He gritted his teeth, turning back to his companion. 'Culture. Are you going to be alright?'

'Yes' the aberrant said smiling, as he lowered his body to the ground. 'I just…need to rest a while…' he lay back on the pavement, breathing a deep sigh as he relaxed his muscles. 'Go' he said.

Indigo gave a nod; then ran after the creatures, leaving the aberrant alone in the skate park to rest.

A short pursuit followed that ended in failure, the creatures snarled and howled in frustration, throwing curses and words of hate towards the guardians for delaying them. They turned their tails and ran away.

The two creatures returned to their master, who was waiting patiently for them in another part of the town.

'Well?' he said when they appeared.

Kreas began to cackle.

'We saw her, very briefly though. She is here after all, as we thought.'

'And the net?' the master asked. 'You've trapped it here?'

Li growled with the thrill and pleasure, still excited from the chase. Her white pupil-less eyes gleamed.

'The net is complete. She is trapped here. With thanks to the others.'

'Thanks?' the master asked.

'They were creating a net to trap her also' Li replied. 'Like we were.'

'I see' the master said thoughtfully. 'Well it makes sense. We have the same cause after all. It's just too bad we're not working together. Things would be so much easier if we were.'

'They will not be convinced' Kreas said slinking forwards and hissing in frustration.

The master nodded in understanding. 'You've done well Kreas, and Li' he said looking from one to the other.

The two changed then, transforming into their human selves.

Kreas cracked his knuckles, and Li brushed her hair back.

The master grinned cruelly. 'It's become a game then' he said. 'Who will catch her first?'

'Have you checked the drawers?'

Reuben began pulling out everything that was in the drawer, dumping the contents untidily wherever there was space.

'Nothing' Reuben sighed.

'Check in the kitchen.'

Reuben shoved everything messily back into the drawer and shuffled towards the kitchen. Lucas continued to scroll down the page on the laptop, listening to the sound of pots and pans being thrown about and doors banging loudly.

'There's a job going in the bakery' Lucas called to his brother. 'Just down the road, you know the one.'

Reuben popped his head round the door.

'I am *not* wearing a hairnet.'

Lucas snapped the laptop shut, turning with his arm on the back of the chair.

'We're going to have to get a job soon or else won't be able to pay for anything.'

'The money for this place automatically gets taken out of her bank account every month' Reuben argued.

'I know that' Lucas huffed in irritation. 'But what about food? We can't eat the furniture can we?'

'Good point.' Reuben mused. 'The cupboards are near enough empty….she could have at least done a shop before she left.'

Lucas groaned, rubbing his forehead with a hand. 'Did you find anything?'

'Found this' Reuben produced a coin. 'Two pounds.' He looked to his older brother. 'One pound each? We could go to the shop and buy something nice.'

'Oh how dire our situation has become, alright lets go.'

Reuben tossed the coin in the air and Lucas caught it as he rose from his seat.

'So where's Jacob gone then?' Reuben asked, picking up a hoodie from the back of the chair and putting it on.

'He's on holiday with his parents to visit family. Cousins and grandparents…you know.'

'I wonder what it's like to have a big family' Reuben thought aloud.

'Must be nice' his brother said forlorn.

'Oh well. So what are you going to get?'

'I don't know' Lucas shrugged. 'Lion bar?'

'What are we going to eat later?'

'Let's not worry about that until later comes' Lucas said, grabbing him round the shoulders and walking with him towards the door.

'Aren't we going to lock it?' Reuben asked as they left.

'Why? It's not like there's anything to steal.'

'We could sell the TV if things get really desperate.'

Lucas shrugged again. 'I don't see why not. Sounds like a good idea.' He turned and locked the door behind them.

Once they were outside, it was only a short walk towards the shop where on the way they met Drake and Lauralie.

'Hey look there's Drake and Lauralie' Reuben called as he spotted them approaching.

Lucas groaned as Reuben ran towards them.

'Hey guys!'

'Reuben' Lauralie beamed slowing to a stop. 'It's so good to see you.'

Beside her Drake smirked and gave a nod.

'Where are you two off to?' Reuben asked as Lucas dragging his feet followed his brother.

'There's a show here today' Lauralie smiled. 'We're just going off to see.'

'A show?' Reuben asked.

'There are two brothers performing as street dancers' Drake replied. 'They're supposed to be very good.'

'I've heard about them' Reuben said. 'Never actually seen them before though.'

'Hey why don't you come along with us?' Lauralie volunteered. 'It'll be even more fun with more of us.'

'Maybe some other time' Lucas interjected before Reuben could agree and result in them all being dragged around the town by her.

Lauralie pouted, deflating. Disappointment was written all over her face.

'Lucas you're such a bore sometimes.'

The two glared at each other.

'We could meet you later' Reuben thought aloud suddenly, causing Lucas to wince.

Lucas turned and glared at Reuben now.

'Where is it exactly?' Reuben asked, ignoring his brother.

'In the centre of town' Lauralie said becoming suddenly animated again and bouncing on the balls of her feet. Drake had to steady himself as she used him for support. 'It should be easy enough to find' she smiled. 'Just follow the crowd.'

'Good' Reuben nodded. 'We'll see you there.'

Lucas shrugged.

'I told Sian we'll be there tomorrow' Drake said to Lucas.

'You did? Good.' Lucas suddenly perked up. His stomach growled then.

'Well we'd better go now' Reuben said. 'We'll meet you later ok?'

'Great' Lauralie cried out excitedly. 'Don't be late!'

Drake touched a finger to his forehead and nodded at them, before he was dragged off by Lauralie.

Once they were out of earshot, Lucas spoke to his brother.

'Why did you do that?'

'What?'

'Volunteer to go to this stupid show.'

'You don't want to go?' Reuben asked.

'I don't want to go with *her*.'

'Don't be like that.' Reuben frowned at Lucas, shaking his head. 'I know she can be annoying sometimes but she's not that bad.'

'Hm.'

'Don't be like that' Reuben said again.

'She just never shuts up.'

Reuben shrugged. 'Stick your fingers in your ears.'

Lucas made a strange face.

'How peculiar would I look walking around doing that?'

Reuben smirked in amusement.

'Come on' Lucas said marching away. 'Let's hurry up and buy some food. I'm starving.'

They walked for a short time before Lucas spoke again.

'We've got to be careful' Lucas told his brother seriously. 'She seems to want to spend a lot of time with us; we have to be careful she doesn't see our magic.'

'She won't.'

'Oh? You seem certain.'

They came to the edge of the pavement to cross the road. Lucas suddenly grabbed Reuben by the sleeve and pulled him sharply back.

The car sped by, and Lucas relaxed his arm, letting go of Reuben.

'How can you be so sure?' Lucas continued their conversation as if nothing had happened.

'Well as long as we're careful, there will be no mistakes.'

'Everybody makes mistakes' Lucas replied. 'I worry sometimes that she'll find out.'

They crossed the road at a quickened pace, careful to avoid the cars. The weekend was always busy here, especially on sunny days like today.

'We have to ensure our mistakes are kept to a minimum' Lucas went on.

'I thought we were doing that.'

'We can never be too careful. Especially around *her*.' Lucas paused momentarily, taking in the environment. 'Let's go through the skate park.'

'You want to avoid the crowds?'

'I would like to avoid people altogether' Lucas said, stepping forwards. 'But in a town like this and on the weekend it's impossible.'

They changed course and went in the opposite direction to where they were originally heading. It was only a short detour to the shops this way, and the best way to go to avoid most of the people.

The skate park when they reached it was thankfully not too busy. Plastered with thick graffiti on every possible surface, the skate-park was a large one, giving lots of space to the people within. Some people did tricks on the rams and half-pipes, others hung around in groups watching the world around them. Everything was brightly coloured here, including the people who resided here. They wore trashy jeans and bright shirts, some with backwards caps.

The brothers passed a wall; there was an image of a large lidless eye staring unseeing outwards, alongside a psycho rabbit that was devouring heads.

A skater swerved around the brothers as they sauntered through the park, and they watched their step as they walked. It was easy to have an accident in a place like this. The sound of the wheels rolling on the concrete, boards grinding on the rails and the muttering of voices from the groups that had gathered continued as constant noises overlapped each other. Everything should have been normal, but there was something out of the ordinary here today, something that few could see.

Lucas slowed to a stop, eyes sliding across the park.

'What's wrong?' Reuben asked pausing and glancing back at him. '…Lucas?'

Reuben could not see his brother's face from where he stood, but he knew something wasn't right. He walked back to him, following his gaze.

'Hey is that the new girl?'

Lucas didn't reply.

'I heard her name is Rhian.'

Lucas approached her silently, with Reuben slinking behind.

Rhian was kneeling by one of the graffiti covered walls, wearing her typical dark colours. As the brothers approached they saw what it was that had caught her attention, from a distance they had not seen, as she had blocked their view.

Lucas circled around, coming to stand in front of her. Finally Rhian lifted her head, acknowledging them at last. At a glance she seemed weary, exhausted. Her eyes were sunken and her hair was scruffy. It looked as if she hadn't slept. The creature she was kneeling before; was a thing the brothers had never seen in their lives. Lying on his front seemingly unconscious was a creature resembling a human in shape, but with the black skin of an aberrant. With flesh the shade of coal, he had large wings at his back. Leathery and bat-like they were, and bearing huge curled hooks on the joint. His hair, jet black like the rest of him grew down to his shoulders, and he had a long thin tail that ended in a point. His chest was bare, and he wore black wide legged trousers.

Lucas had the strangest thought at that moment.

'Ha!' he barked a laugh. 'He wears black just like you do.'

'What are you implying?' Rhian glared. She rose to a stand. 'I don't even know who you are.'

'And let's keep it that way' Lucas replied.

'Hey, I'm Reuben' Reuben said stepping forward with a smile.

Rhian's upper lip twitched and she crossed her arms in distain.

The figure on the ground lay peacefully as if he were only asleep. His face was young, and his skin was sleek and smooth and flawless.

'You can see him?' Rhian asked them.

'What do you mean?'

'None of the others can see him. I've watched several people walk past, some even glancing this way.'

And it was true. The skaters carried on, seemingly oblivious to the presence of the strange being simply lying in plain sight.

'Wait a minute' Reuben spoke up. 'You're a guardian!'

Rhian scowled at him. 'Is he the smarter of you two?' she asked Lucas.

Lucas began to laugh hysterically. 'Oh come on Reuben don't look so angry' he said to his brother when he calmed.

Rhian circled around the brothers, moving away from the winged being on the floor.

'I saw fighting' Rhian told them. 'There are more of them; I don't know if it's entirely safe here right now.'

'Are you scared?' Lucas asked raising his eyebrows.

'Of course not!' Rhian spat.

Lucas smirked, feeling a strange satisfaction at getting under her skin. Beside him Reuben was positively quivering with excitement.

'There've been aberrants walking around lately' he said. 'Have you seen them?'

'I've fought them' Rhian answered.

'You have skills in fighting?' Reuben asked with interest looking her up and down. 'How nice.'

'I was brought up fighting' Rhian said. 'I saw my first aberrant when I was very young.'

'Why do they appear?' Lucas asked her. 'We've never seen one before…but somehow we know what they are.'

Rhian smirked then, amused by their lack of knowledge. 'You don't know much about being a guardian do you?'

Lucas felt a twinge of annoyance, but he'd be dammed if he let her know by showing it.

'You want to know what attracts them, what draws them out?' she said.

The brothers waited patiently for a response.

'Philosophers stone' Rhian breathed. 'There is one here.'

'Where did you hear that?' Lucas asked slowly, narrowing his eyes.

Rhian stopped circling, turning to face them now.

'I have seen visions of another world, where there are many guardians. Like us. There are Philosophers stones there, its where they originated. But some fled here.'

'Fled?' Lucas asked. 'You mean these things have a mind of their own?'

'Is that your power?' Reuben butt in. 'Seeing this other world?'

'It is one of my powers' she replied curtly.

Reuben began to fumble his words, Lucas knew he was deciding which question to ask first, but in his enthusiasm he came across as a jabbering fool.

Lucas knelt by the black skinned figure on the ground, suddenly noticing how tall he was, at least a head taller than the average man. He also noticed something else.

'Reuben look at this.'

'What is it?'

'These marks' Lucas replied. 'The ground has been scorched.'

'It's on the walls as well' Reuben suddenly noticed.

Rhian watched the brothers sceptically.

Lucas became suddenly rigid.

'We have to get out of here.'

'Why?' Reuben asked, worried by his brother's urgent change of tone. He glanced around nervously. 'Is it safe?'

Rising fast Lucas whipped round, turning on the spot.

'Lucas…' Reuben said in a steady tone, 'Lucas you're scaring me.'

The following events were the start of a life completely new, a life in a different direction, a life as a true guardian.

'This is the first time in my life…' Reuben whispered in awe, head tilted back as the shadow passed over them, 'that I have ever seen one like *this*.'

'I knew we shouldn't have stayed here' Rhian said backing away. 'I knew it was dangerous.'

The beast cried out in many voices. A high pitched screech, over a moaning noise that sounded almost like

the wind. It was a terrible thing to hear, like an agonising cry of pain and despair.

'Aberrant' Rhian whispered.

It came, crawling up and over the wall they had been standing by. Its movement was graceful yet exaggerated. It was a tall creature, strange in appearance with a thin body and very long legs that ended in sharp unforgiving talons. Its neck was shaped like that of a horse, and it had a small oval head, narrow eyes and a thin scraggly mane. The most bizarre thing about this aberrant however, was its mouth. It was long like a tube, with what looked like sharp inward curved teeth at the opening on the end. Running all the way down the tube were creases, like the kind one might find on an umbrella, its mouth was like this.

The aberrant swung its mighty head over them, letting out a prolonged hiss, advancing on them menacingly.

The three backed away quickly. Reuben cast his palms out, summoning flames that wreathed the flesh of his hands. 'Quick use your magic!'

The aberrant moved towards them, following their movement carefully as they backed away further. Its look was far too intelligent for ones liking, it was as if the thing was assessing them. The beast paused and flicked its lizard-like tail, swinging its long mouth from side to side.

'What are you doing?!' Rhian hissed at Reuben. She grabbed him by the arm and jerked him towards her.

The fires went out.

'You can't kill it!' she told him. 'You're not strong enough, it's too big!'

'Who are you to tell me that' he growled, yanking his arm out of her grip. 'You have no idea about my powers.'

Lucas took another step away, concentration fixed on the aberrant, which was advancing again.

'Guys its coming closer…' Lucas informed them, uncertainty lacing his voice.

'Have *you* ever fought these beasts before' Rhian snapped at Reuben turning on him.

'And you have?' Reuben retorted.

'Are you even listening?' Lucas stepped further away.

'I've been a guardian a lot longer than you have' Rhian went on.

'How the hell would you know something like that?!'

'It's coming!' Lucas called over both of them.

'I know a lot of things you don't' Rhian said balling her fists in fury, ignoring Lucas' cries.

'That's not an answer' Reuben shot back.

'It's good enough!'

'The aberrant is rather close…' Lucas said.

'Then show me your powers' Reuben demanded.

'I am not under your control!' she screeched. She grabbed him again. 'Are you stupid enough to use magic in front of these people?!'

'GUYS!'

The beast opened its mouth and roared.

Their clothes and hair were blown back violently in the sudden gale. Its mouth had opened out into a

massive pentagon shape. The long tube of its mouth had opened outwards like a massive umbrella, now this was all they saw, teeth and tongue, and the pink inside of its fleshy mouth in one massive shape.

Reuben saw fast movement out of the corner of his eye, though he didn't acknowledge it. He was fixed to the spot, by awe by fear by shock, he didn't know which.

The aberrant closed its mouth again, shrinking it back into its tubular form.

Reuben realised now that Rhian was not with him, realising the movement out of the corner of his eye must have been her. He spotted her, standing on a half-pipe a safe distance away. There were black wings coming out of her back, feathered they were, like an angels. Reuben simply stared at her dumbfounded, feeling too many emotions to put a label to any of them.

'Reuben!' his brother called.

Reuben shifted his sights back to the creature before him. It hissed again, sensing his weakness and targeting it. The aberrant in one swift movement swung its mighty clawed hand. Its range of attack was far, its long limbs stretched outwards and claws unfurling. In his frozen state Reuben could not react, locked in what was now only pure fear.

He was suddenly shoved aside by his brother, tasting the pavement.

He heard his brother cry out behind him, saw him fall to his knees. Behind the strange mouthed beast, the unconscious guardian was stirring.

Lucas began to shake, there were three deep gashes in his side, and blood spilling down the left side of his body at an alarming rate.

Reuben pushed himself up, wiping his chin with the back of a hand as he did so and feeling blood there. He ran to his brother, falling to his knees.

Lucas' body tensed, his hands were shaking violently as he held his injury, trying in vain to stop the bleeding. The first stage of shock was setting in, and Reuben could see his brother was paling fast. Lucas had never felt pain like it before, but then again, he was still a young guardian.

'Lucas?'

Lucas lifted his head, saying in a trembling voice to Reuben, 'are you alright?'

Reuben didn't answer.

The guardian who had been unconscious mere moments ago had risen, standing now with wings splayed and tail flicking from side to side. He had a menacing dark aura about him. He circled calmly around the aberrant, coming to stand before it.

Please, don't hurt us. Reuben thought as the winged being drew closer.

The stranger stood now between the brothers and the aberrant. In his dark hands he held chakrams. With many great spikes around its circular edges, the metal was painted vividly in black and red. These were weapons he had summoned from the very air itself, weapons that were wreathed in flame. This was his magic.

He charged forwards with all the speed, agility and confidence of one born into war. A true guardian.

The winged stranger threw out both his weapons before him, spinning them in the air they created a wall of fire which blazed and roared fiercely. The aberrant screeched in fear as the fire burned bright, forcing it

backwards. It scuttled, like a panicked animal trapped on ice trying get away, tripping over its own exaggerated limbs. It ran. The black skinned stranger released his magic with a sharp intake of breath, weapons vanishing into thin air.

Reuben tore his eyes away and looked to where Rhian had stood not moments before, only to see that she wasn't there.

'She's gone…' Reuben gasped in horror, 'she left us…'

The winged guardian approached the brothers, staring expressionlessly over Lucas. Lucas had fallen on his side still holding himself, curled up and groaning in agony.

'Please don't hurt us' Reuben begged. 'Please help him…'

The black guardian knelt over Lucas, grabbing his arm and forcing it up with a hard grip. All the better to see the wound.

The gashes were deep, and there were three of them. He would surely bleed to death in minutes.

It was lucky in that instance, that the stranger was not only an experienced guardian, but also a healer as well.

Chapter Three

Tin Miners

Lucas' forehead began to hurt somewhat as he rested it against the solid, unforgiving concrete. His hip and shoulder hurt too as he lay uncomfortably, but no more than his new injury, which now became nothing more than a dull throb. The strange being was running his hands along his bare waist, having lifted his shirt up to see the injury. The stranger examined the flesh where Lucas had been cut, slowly healing him.

It didn't hurt so much anymore, in fact he felt ok.

The man, if he could be called that, ordered Lucas to sit up. His tone was short and sharp. Lucas obeyed before he realised he had, kneeling now. He removed his shirt on command and the stranger began to wrap around Lucas' waist a roll of bandage. He wound it around and around his torso until he came to the end of the roll, where he tied it off. Lucas' shirt, torn and bloodied was discarded. Reuben waited nervously nearby, pacing back and forth.

'How do you feel?' Culture asked.

'Surprisingly good' Lucas replied rising gingerly.

The stranger grunted.

'I would have done a better job at healing the wound, but I don't have a lot of strength right now….I am weak.' Culture rose to a stand. 'The injury is mostly healed. I suggest you keep discrete about it until it's healed fully. You would have a hard time I'm sure explaining to others how you got it.' He sent a thin jet of fire towards Lucas' shirt which lay on the floor nearby, completely destroying it in the blaze and leaving behind only ash.

Lucas stared wordlessly up at him. His glaze slid past the stranger and to the skate park around them. Despite all that had happened in the last few minutes, the scene around them, had not changed.

Bizarre Lucas thought to himself.

'You're very young' the aberrant noted. 'I've not often met a guardian so young.' He glanced at Reuben, who continued his pacing.

'Brothers I assume' he said.

Lucas examined himself; the bandages looked clean and new, as if they had only just left the hospital. He studied the black skinned man before him, and saw that his wings were folded neatly back, now looking so much smaller than they had before. They reminded Lucas of a bat.

'Thanks' Lucas said awkwardly. 'Where did you get these?' he indicated the bandages.

'I can summon objects from afar' Culture said.

'It was good of you to help me.'

Reuben quickened his pace, continuing back and forth.

'Any good man would have done the same' Culture purred.

'But you are not a man are you?' Lucas said. 'You're an aberrant.'

The aberrant paused.

'There are many different kinds of aberrant that exist' he said. 'Some of them look a lot like myself, like a human. Others look like beasts, like the one you just saw. They are not intelligent. For the most part.'

'There are many aberrants?' Lucas asked.

'Oh yes' Culture replied slyly.

'Lucas I'm so sorry' Reuben cut in huskily, suddenly interrupting them. 'I froze up, it was weak of me…you got hurt because of me…it was stupid I'm sorry…!'

'Hey' Lucas smiled gently, speaking in a calming tone. 'It's not your fault.'

'I was stupid' Reuben repeated.

'Everybody makes mistakes' his brother told him.

'A mistake that could have killed you.'

It sounded more than he intended like a verbal attack. Reuben forced himself to relax and took a slow, deep breath.

'Are you going to be ok?' he asked.

'He's going to be fine' Culture told Reuben. 'Just take it easy' he said to Lucas, 'and don't do anything too strenuous.'

Culture turned away.

'I had better be going now; I've got to find the others.'

'The others? Lucas rounded on him. 'You mean there are more of you?'

'The rest of my group' the aberrant replied.

Lucas and Reuben exchanged a glance uncertainly.

'How many are there?' Reuben asked.

'Four of my group including myself' Culture answered. 'And more.'

'More?' Lucas echoed.

He took off without warning, flying away before Lucas had another chance to toss him a new question.

I don't understand Lucas thought.

The aberrant moved through the sky with the ease of any bird, he soared over the town, quickly growing smaller until he vanished from sight entirely.

'I forgot to ask his name' Lucas trailed off in the following silence.

'It doesn't matter.' Reuben turned to him. 'Are you sure you're going to be ok?'

'I'll be fine. And don't keep asking.'

Reuben took another slow breath. 'We should go home.'

'I think so.'

Reuben moved close to his brother, helping to support him as he walked.

'I'll be fine.'

'That's not what *he* said' Reuben retorted. 'You have to take it easy from now on.'

Lucas groaned with the effort, moving slowly and carefully, and putting most of his weight on Reuben as he did so.

'You know you're really heavy.'

Lucas smirked. He hunched over suddenly, throwing back his head and laughing. His mirth quickly subsided into tense moans as he clutched at his side. He relaxed, and straightened up again.

'What the *hell* do you find so amusing?' Reuben asked, giving him a strange look as if he were mad.

'There are abnormal magical creatures in this world now, and we're worrying about finding food?'

Lucas sighed shaking his head.

Reuben looked to the nearest group of people; they were doing wheelies on their skateboards and spinning in the air as they took off from the ramps.

'Blind fools' Reuben cursed them with a glare. 'After all that and they're all completely oblivious.'

'It's better they don't see anything' Lucas replied. 'We wouldn't want that kind of attention anyway.'

'It makes you think though doesn't it?'

'Does it?'

'How can they not see a guardian's magic or aberrants?' Reuben voiced aloud. 'They must have a spell of some sort put on all of them.'

'I guess we're not going to meet Drake and Lauralie after all' Lucas sighed as they shuffled along, sounding not in the least bit disappointed about it.

'I guess not.'

Lucas slouched tentatively forwards, supported by his brother. He felt uncomfortable without his shirt, reluctant to be seen with these bandages on, especially by somebody he knew. Looking down at himself he could see spots of blood were already seeping through the bandages.

'Give me your hoodie' Lucas said suddenly, 'I don't want to be seen walking around bleeding everywhere…wouldn't want that kind of attention.'

Reuben immediately complied, and they walked very slowly back home. Reuben supported his brother the entire way.

Once Kreas and Li had gone, having deemed their quarry lost and the trail gone cold, Siren turned back. Retracing her footsteps, she soon found her red haired companion, who was now with the aberrant and the mother. All four of the guardians were present now. The aberrant seemed to be telling the other two a strange story, of two young guardians he had met, brothers. He had healed one of them after he had become injured by a strike from another aberrant. Siren heard as she approached them, that he would likely make a full recovery.

'Did you find her?' Indigo asked the second he noticed Siren. The mother and the aberrant turned simultaneously at her arrival.

Siren shook her head reluctantly.

'I'm sorry' she spoke in a gentle voice. 'I lost her.'

'It's ok' Culture reassured her. 'We have her trapped here. There is nowhere for her to go.'

'Don't you feel bad for it though?' Siren asked Culture.

'Bad for what?'

'When I ran after her, she stopped for a moment……she had the saddest look in her eyes.'

'How did she escape?' Culture asked her.

'I don't quite remember. It was a trick of some kind; she used some of her magic on me. I remember seeing a dragonfly, but it looked mechanical, not living.'

'I thought she couldn't use her magic' Culture said.

'They can' the mother spoke up. 'But only in very small amounts compared to the magic they posses.'

'What a joke' Culture laughed shaking his head without mirth. 'Having so much power and not even being able to use it, the gods must really have a sense of humour.'

'She is trapped here now' Indigo declared. 'She will be caught. It's only a matter of time. Let's just try to make sure we get her before *they* do.'

It was packed in the centre of town when Lauralie and Drake arrived. The market was open today and there were many attractions and sights to take in. Money exchanged hands at stalls which had been set up outside the regular shops, stalls selling all kinds of things. One sold interestingly shaped helium balloons, another sold take-away snacks as well as little gifts and trinkets, and one was selling masks made of the most fabulous and colourful designs. Lauralie danced past stall after stall, eyeing up its merchandise, skipping past a figure wearing a plague mask, and sparing it only a glance. There were dream catchers and candles on one stall, another that sold all bags, one garden accessories, another did engravings. Lauralie fussed and hurried around the market, picking up everything she could get her hands on. She reached the end of the row of stalls,

then turned back and started all over again. Trailing after her Drake followed patiently, feigning interest in the things she tried to show him.

'Hey look a Ferris wheel!' Lauralie suddenly called out excitedly.

Drake glanced at it, amazed by her short attention span.

'That wheel is there every year' he said in an exasperated tone.

'I know. But I get so excited.' She moved away from Drake and towards the Ferris wheel, weaving in and out of the crowd of people. 'I keep forgetting how busy it gets' Lauralie said to Drake, who was struggling not to lose her in the crowd as he followed behind.

The wheel was located very close to the town centre where the brothers would perform, but Lauralie and Drake's progress moving through the ever thickening crowd was slow and tedious, especially when Lauralie stopped at every opportunity to look at everything. Her excuse was that she was attracted to things that shine. Little trinkets, cut glass in the shape of tiny animals, earrings with too many digits, she even found a silk scarf that sadly didn't match her hair colour. Drake in turn would occasionally risk going off on his own to look at things that interested him, watches, shirts with brand names, she would find him soon enough as he never wandered far. It was easy enough to get lost with so many people around.

'I told Alice I would meet her in the town centre' Lauralie was saying. 'She should be there somewhere. But we might need to get to higher ground to find her.'

The scene in the town was wonderful in all its bright colours. Closer to the centre near the Ferris wheel were tents of red and yellow, blue and white, and green and white. Some of them were hosting sideshows and stalls which featured games like the coconut shy, and others which involved rubber duckies.

Lauralie and Drake passed a merry go round on their way, with its insufferable and repetitive music. They paused again briefly and Drake bought each of them a toffee apple.

We'd better go meet your friend' he said at last when they had finished. 'She must be wondering where we are.'

'Well' Lauralie winked at him. 'We would get a better view of the town from the Ferris wheel. She would be easier to find.'

'How did I know you'd say that' Drake smiled wearily.

From the Ferris wheel, they finally caught sight of Alice who was waiting for them at the edge of the crowd within the town centre. When the ride had finished, Lauralie leapt from the carriage and ran to meet her. She was greeted by several other friends that Alice had brought with her. And once he had caught up again, Lauralie introduced Drake to the others, causing many of them to immediately swoon over him. Drake was very handsome.

Once the formalities and introductions were over, Alice led the group quickly to the front of the crowd.

'Come over here, the show's nearly started' she told them.

They made their way forwards though the mass of people with smiles and winks. Drake came after them, moving slowly and politely so as not to intrude upon anyone.

They eventually reached the front and stood in a row side by side as the performance began, with Lauralie in the middle.

They waited for the performance to begin.

The first brother almost had an aggressive look about him, a look of attitude. He was tall, wearing torn jeans and a blue coat with an upturned black collar. His ears were pierced and on the left side of his neck, was a tattoo of a beautiful rose with its petals unfurled. His hair was spiked downwards and was pure white, streaked in vivid red. His expression was calculated, and he had freakishly unnatural bright blue eyes that pierced the very soul.

The music started simple, only one brother was there, he moved in time with the tunes, dancing with his shoulders first, head perfectly still. Then as the second beat came in he moved to the side, sliding his whole body, arms and legs and head and neck in perfectly graceful motions, moves perfectly co-ordinated. Then he suddenly turned stiff, robotic. He pushed himself to the ground, impossibly low; then with no effort at all rose to a volley of cheering and clapping. People laughed as he impersonated a robot, a car, moved closer, winked at a girl.

Drake chuckled, clapping his hands.

'He's pretty good' he admitted to Lauralie. 'What do you think?'

The dancing brother shuffled to the side in a crouched position, holding a comical face, his body slowed in time with the music. His robot self shut down.

'He's very good' Lauralie smiled back, not entirely impressed as the routine came to an end.

His first dance was quite simple, the music not too fast or lively.

The second brother stepped in. Lauralie gasped in awe as they began, it was at that moment; her heart was taken, beating faster as she watched utterly mesmerized as they moved.

The second brother had a gentler appearance and a softer expression. There was almost a boy-Lolita look about him. He had blonde highlights in his light brown hair, which was medium in length, and he was dressed more casually than his older brother.

Throwing his head back he marched forwards, his dancing was just as aggressive as his brothers. Lauralie was fixated on him, taking in his every feature. He was shorter than the other brother, but had eyes just like his.

Dancing side by side, occasionally changing positions to hide behind the others, using their arms, using their legs and moving their heads, they twisted their bodies. Locking and popping, they danced in various styles.

It was fast, it was beautiful, but all too soon it was over.

Lauralie let out a breath that didn't know she had been holding. She gathered herself again, only to see Drake giving her a teasing look.

'Fallen in love have we?'

'What are you talking about?' Lauralie flushed in a sharp tone.

'Oh don't give me that' he nudged at her arm playfully. 'Do you think I'm blind?'

She was a lot angrier and irritated with herself than she expected, and was surprised at what she felt. Was it perhaps because someone had caught her off-guard? That had never happened before.

But before she could say anything else to Drake he had mumbled something to her that she didn't quite hear; then he left her side. Lauralie craned her head, trying to find him in the crowd, wondering what he was up to. But he was gone.

'That sneaky little devil.'

Alice cut her thoughts.

'They should be taking a break now' she said as the brothers moved away. 'So? What did you think?'

'They were really good' Lauralie answered, composing herself.

'Come on' Alice said. 'Let's go look at some of the stalls.'

It was beginning to get dark by the time the group decided to split up and go home. Drake had found Lauralie walking with Alice before they had left the town. He didn't say where he went or why, which

annoyed Lauralie even more, and no matter how much she nagged him he remained silent. But the glint in his eye still remained.

After nearly an hour she gave up asking.

'It's really pretty here when it's dark' Lauralie sighed, sitting on a low wall with Alice and Drake either side of her.

The town was quietening as people returned to their homes, and the funfair was winding down, only a few people still trailed back and forth now. And yet it grew more beautiful by night. Multicoloured electric lights on strings, the dim lights of the stalls, the tents now silent and desolate for the most part sat with their darkening colours. The entire town square glowed with magnificence and the aftermath of the joy the day had brought to so many people. It was all so peaceful.

'You're right' Alice replied to Lauralie, rising and pulling her with her as they walked side by side. 'It is really nice here.'

Drake pushed himself off the wall, following after the two girls.

The three of them wandered through the empty town square, heading slowly towards the Ferris wheel.

Alice twirled and took a seat on a flight of steps that led up to the base of the Ferris wheel, which now sat still and silent, but with its lights still burning bright.

'It's a shame Reuben and Lucas didn't come' Lauralie said glumly, taking a seat beside Alice. 'It would have been nice. I wonder why they didn't in the end.'

'There's always tomorrow' Alice chimed in.

'Come on' Drake said to the both of them. 'It's getting late, we had better be going. I'll take you both home now.'

'Oooooh he's such a gentleman' Alice teased nudging Lauralie's arm. 'I don't know why do you don't go with him.'

'I'm ready to go home now' Lauralie said in a deliberate voice sharper than she intended. She had had quite enough annoyance for today. 'Take me home Drake.'

'How do you feel?' Reuben asked Lucas.

'Alright I guess.'

They had just arrived home safely; Lucas was lying down on the sofa with his feet up and several pillows behind his head. It was the first place he chose to rest as soon as they got back. Reuben proceeded to bombard him with questions as to how comfortable he was and if there was anything else he could do to help.

'You really shouldn't fuss so much Reuben' Lucas tittered, taking the bowl of steaming soup his brother handed him. A readymade sachet found at the back of one of the cupboard.

'I can't help it, I'm sorry I just feel so bad.'

'Just forget it' Lucas drawled.

'But you could have died because of me.'

'Well I could have, but I didn't.'

Reuben sat and stared at Lucas as he sipped the soup from his bowl. After a while Lucas began feeling uncomfortable under the glare.

'I'm fine. You know you don't have to stare at me for the rest of the day.' Lucas began to laugh. He tensed suddenly, holding his side. Immediately Reuben rushed forwards the grab the bowl before it spilled.

Lucas gave him a disapproving frown, taking the bowl back. The two of them relaxed, Lucas more than Reuben.

'We could spent our whole lives saying *but what if*' Lucas began. 'Nothing was ever gained from regret.'

'I know.'

'Tell you what' Lucas began as a sudden thought hit him. 'If you want to do something for me why don't you go find this girl Rhian?'

'I could do that' Reuben nodded eagerly. 'Where would I find her?'

'Jeez I don't know…just look around.'

'Ok.'

'We guardians should stick together' Lucas went on. 'I think it's important that you find her.'

'But why did she run off, I mean fly off…she's got *wings*!'

Lucas gave Reuben a sceptical look.

'Wings aren't anything new Reuben.'

'I know.'

'She may resent being a guardian' Lucas continued. 'It's not easy being different and living half a life in secret. We need to convince her how great the gift we've been given really is. We can help her.'

'Alright, I'll try my best' Reuben said rising. 'Are you sure you don't need anything else?'

'Just go' Lucas droned in a bored voice.

Reuben nodded, hesitated; and then made for the door.

'Ok then…um…bye…'

He hesitated again; then left.

Lucas smiled to himself, thinking fondly of his brother's foolishness. He sat back against the pillows, sighing and closing his eyes content.

Here he rested for several minutes, until he received a call on his mobile. Not recognising the number, he answered anyway.

'Hello?'

'Hey' came a female voice. 'It's me.'

'Hey Sian' Lucas smiled, grateful to hear his girlfriends voice. 'I don't recognise this number.'

'My phone broke' Sian explained. 'I'm using another. Anyway I just thought I'd check on you. I would hate for you to forget about me.'

'I could never forget about you.'

'I should think not' she answered. 'So, how are you?'

'I'm fine.'

'Anything to report?'

'Nope.'

'Ok good. So when are you coming to see me next?'

'I don't know' Lucas admitted. 'I haven't got much money.'

'Ok, well how about I come down to see you.'

'Maybe.'

'You don't like that idea?'

'I'm feeling a bit unwell.'

'If you say so' Sian dismissed. 'I'll speak to you later then. Don't strain yourself.' She hung up.

Lucas stared at the mobile. His girlfriend had never been the clingy type, most of the time if anything she was distant. But there was nothing she wouldn't do for him.

He closed the mobile, slipping it back into his pocket and becoming still.

It was several hours later when it began to get dark, and Reuben had still not returned. Lucas sat there growing bored, sitting in complete silence. He began to get worried.

About another hour or so later the phone rang, catching Lucas by surprise. Its call was loud and persistent breaking the silence.

Lucas heaved himself up. He slouched his way over towards the phone, holding his side and moving gingerly. Lucas wondered who would call at this time.

He stopped before it, and picked up the phone.

'Hello?'

'Is this Lucas?' a female voice said quickly.

'Yes?'

'I'm a district nurse from Golden Heart Hospital, your brothers been hit by a car.'

Reuben spent many minutes scanning the whole town, walking in random directions and feeling hopeless. Things had begun to wind down now, and even the crowd in the town centre had begun to break itself up. He wandered now through one of the parks

on the edges of the town, thinking he would never find her. But by a phenomenal piece of luck, he actually did. Leaning against a wall she was throwing chunks of bread at the ducks in the pond before her.

There were no streetlights here, though the road next to the pond was still fairly busy. The sun was beginning to dip, and the park was growing dark. By the time Reuben reached her, she had already seen him.

'I can't believe I actually found you.'

'I can't believe you were stupid enough to try' she retorted.

Rhian threw the last piece of bread and turned on her heel, storming away.

'Hey wait where are you going?' Reuben called after her.

She didn't answer but continued to walk, her pace quickened.

'Wait!'

Reuben ran to catch up.

'Leave me alone!'

'Hey don't be like that, I just want to talk to you.'

'Talk to this,' she said, pausing only briefly and giving him the finger.

Reuben hesitated. 'Well there's no need for that.'

He ran to catch up with her again.

'Why are you being like this' Reuben demanded, 'I just want to talk?'

'Yeah well I don't.'

Growing increasingly more irritated; he struggled to keep up with her now, almost jogging.

'Listen, I understand if you're upset and confused, it's not an easy thing.'

She stopped, swinging her head towards him in a sarcastic gesture.

'Oh and I'm sure you know *everything*.'

She continued her marching pace.

'Ok, you're annoyed, I get that. You don't have to talk just listen ok, we guardians should stick together.'

'Guardians' she laughed tutting. 'I'm perfectly fine on my own, and *don't* use that word.'

'You're lonely? That's ok you can stick with us, my brother is a guardian as well, like I said our kind should stick together.'

Rhian stopped again, confronting him.

'Stop talking like I'm a different species' she shouted.

'You know I didn't mean it like that.'

'I don't need anybody.' She made to walk away.

'Everybody needs someone.'

She spun around again, fuming and puffing her chest out, fists balled.

'Look stop talking like you know who I am! I don't need you, I don't need anyone else and I certainly don't need these *worthless* powers! You think it's so great being a guardian…then do it on your own!'

She shoved him back as hard as she could.

The car running along the road had no time to stop, and Reuben has not time to protect himself.

The vehicle steamed right into him, screeching its wheels to a halt.

Sterilized to a sickening degree, the hospital smelt of disinfectant and emptiness. Its hallways and floor were white and bland with bored-looking nurses at the desk.

Lucas made his enquiries to a lady sitting at her computer; she was pleasant but stiff in her words, pointing him in the right direction. Lucas took the lift.

It was painfully slow.

Lucas tried his best to compose himself as he moved through the building of sickness, keeping his head straight and not looking either side of him. He heard snoring, crying, moaning.

He was made to wash his hands before entering the next room, the push-device on the wall extracted a tiny squirt of some strange soap that required no water. He was reluctant to touch it, though did so anyway.

The room Reuben was in was large, with four beds on one side, and four on the other. Many were occupied, most of which were elderly. Lucas felt apprehensive as he approached Reuben, who lifted his head as he came closer. A few of the other people around had visitors also. Lucas glanced at the bland design of a clock on the wall.

08.15 PM

'Visiting hours end at half-past' Lucas told him. 'I've only got fifteen minutes.'

'I'm just glad you came' Reuben smiled.

Reuben was sitting up in his bed, pillows stuffed behind him to prop him up.

He looked in bad shape.

He had bruising on one side of his face, under his eye and on his cheek, and all over his left shoulder. His

left arm was in a cast up past his elbow, and he had heavy bandages around his head.

'Don't be stupid' Lucas replied, 'of course I came.'

'I mean, during visiting hours, they wouldn't let you in otherwise.'

'Do you think I'd let a bunch of pansy nurses and doctors stop me from seeing my brother?'

Reuben smiled gratefully at him. He could always count on his brother. Lucas had always been there for him, no matter what.

Lucas sat on the edge of the bed, watching his brother closely. 'How do you feel?'

'Bloody awful.'

Reuben pushed himself higher up on the bed.

'They think I broke a rib, and my wrist is broken, but I don't know why they cast it all the way up to where it is.' He touched his cheek tenderly, then his bandaged head. 'And I've got a concussion; they've given me some drugs that made me throw up. And they said I was lucky not to break my leg too.'

'What happened?' Lucas asked.

'That girl pushed me into the road.'

Lucas diverted his attention. 'This bed isn't very comfortable is it?'

'What are you going to do?' Reuben asked.

'I'm going to find her, *tonight*.'

Reuben didn't ask why.

'Here' Lucas said taking something out of his pocket. 'I got you this.'

He handed Reuben a partially squashed, stone-cold pasty.

'Thanks….what is it?'

'It's called a Tin-Miners. It's like a normal pasty but it's got desert on one end, its apple. Miners apparently used to take it down when they worked. It's like a whole meal in one, meat at one end, and desert on the other, or at least that's what the picture in the shop told me.'

'What did you get for yourself?'

'Nothing' Lucas shrugged.

'But you've hardly eaten today' Reuben protested.

'And you haven't eaten anything at all' Lucas replied.

Reuben nodded. 'Thanks for bringing me this. I'd offer you something from here, but all the food just takes like air…sorry.'

'Don't worry, I'd rather go hungry than eat from this place.' Lucas sighed. 'Do you know when you'll be out?'

'Hopefully tomorrow, the doctor said if the tingling in my fingers stops I can leave. It was only a minor break.'

'Great.'

'Can you open this for me?'

Lucas took the pasty and tore the packet open, handing it back to him.

'I told Drake' Lucas said as Reuben began to eat. 'He said he'll be here tomorrow.'

'Great, does anybody else know?'

'No.'

'Good' Reuben sighed with relief. 'I'd hate to have to explain myself.'

'Well good luck explaining why you have a cast on Monday morning.'

Reuben fell silent as a feeling of dread slowly descended upon him.

'You'll be fine' Lucas reassured, 'don't worry about it.'

'Did you bring me something to read?'

'Sorry I forgot.'

'That's ok,' Reuben shrugged. 'It's just that it's terribly boring in here.'

'I'll be back tomorrow.'

There was the sudden sound of a mobile buzzing.

'That must be Drake' Lucas said rising from the bed, 'I'll tell him you're ok.'

Lucas flipped the mobile open and quickly began to text.

'You'd better go now' Reuben said. 'Visiting hours are almost over and the nurses get really ratty if you hang around, and I don't want to making a scene.'

Lucas hit the 'send' button and snapped the phone shut again.

'Fine' he said smiling confidently at his brother. 'I'll be back again tomorrow, what time am I allowed to visit?'

'Two till five in the afternoon, then after that six thirty till eight thirty.'

'I'll see you then' Lucas clicked his fingers at him. 'I'm going to sell the TV tomorrow morning for some cash. You get some sleep.'

'See you tomorrow.'

Lucas fought the urge to turn and look back as he walked away, aching in his heart at the hurt of his brother, and the thought of having to leave him here.

He realised how Reuben must have felt when he himself had been injured earlier that day. And the guilt.

I shouldn't have asked him to go.

Once home, Lucas spent the remainder of that night drinking whisky until he fell asleep, waking several hours later in the early hours of the morning, he decided to begin searching for Rhian. However, she could not be found.

He returned home and fell asleep again on the sofa, waking this time when Drake rang at one o'clock in the afternoon.

Chapter Four

First Meeting

Sunday

After a brief phone call with Lucas, Drake met him shortly after in his home.

'Did you tell Sian what happened?' Drake asked him, as he sat opposite Lucas on the sofa in the apartment.

'Yeah' he grumbled. 'I told her I can't see her today because of it. I told her that I can't leave Reuben on his own.'

'Really?' Drake replied. 'You're not going?'

'No.'

Drake looked away. 'And she was ok with that?'

'Yes.'

'It would be nice to have some company on the train' Drake lamented.

'Sorry' Lucas mumbled, 'but…' he turned away.

'I know' Drake nodded, 'he's your brother. I understand.'

'So when are you leaving?'

'Later today' Drake replied. 'I want to see Reuben before I go.'

Lucas smiled at that.

'Visiting hours are at two o'clock.'

'That's great' Drake beamed happily. 'We could go together.'

'Sure' Lucas nodded. 'But before we go, could you help me with something?'

'What is it?'

'I need to get rid of the TV' Lucas said, looking over at it.

'Get rid of it?' Drake hesitated. But he did not press. 'Sure' he finished. 'Let's do it now.'

They lifted the TV from its place. Lucas grimaced as they did so, gritting his teeth.

'Are you alright?' Drake asked with concern. 'What's happened?'

Lucas paused, still holding one end of the TV.

'I was' he began. He sighed then, smiling at Drake weakly. 'I was attacked by an aberrant' he finished. 'I…was cut deeply. But I managed to survive. I will be fine now.'

Drake dipped his head.

'Let's go' he said. 'The sooner we get rid of this…'

They carried the TV down the stairs, out of the building and through the streets. Lucas tried his best to hide his pain, although the injury still hurt, it felt better than it did the day before.

He found himself wondered for a moment, if he would ever see the aberrant guardian again. Who was he? And where was he now?

Lucas kept his thoughts silent as he walked with Drake, carrying the TV between them. They sold the TV and Lucas took the money, feeling a little more at ease.

'At least we can eat now' Lucas mumbled under his breath, counting the amount before pocketing it. He turned to Drake then, grinning at him. 'Come on, let's go see Reuben. It's nearly two o'clock; he wouldn't want us to be late.'

They stopped off on the way to grab a take-away in the form of a giant pizza. They reached the hospital just in time. Two o'clock exactly. Visiting hours had just started, and Reuben was wide awake and eager to see them.

There were two creatures on the outskirts of the town at this time, beastly things of the type that no ordinary person has ever seen before.

One resembled a dog, though was the size of a giant horse. Its light brown coat was coarse and brush-like, and it bore a tail that arched over its back. Moving on very long legs, the creature's fox-like ears were constantly twitching and it glared around with narrow pupil-less white eyes. It paused, digging in the dirt and sniffing around. It had found something, and began to dig with long slender fingers on reptilian like claws.

Its companion cackled excitedly, running up beside.

The second creature was very different and much smaller than the first. It walked in a hunched position, its spine always curved. Beside its companion it sniffed

the ground with a button nose. But it was far from cute. Deformed and freakish it looked, with red eyes which were pupil-less like its companion. It grinned cruelly with an unseen mouth that was tucked much further below its round head than any normal creature. It had massive rabbit like ears that flopped downwards, brushing the ground when it walked. And its body was jet black, with fur fine and short. Like its companion it began to dig at the earth with deformed feet, its fingers were splayed as if they were broken and twisted at odd angles as it dug.

These creatures were called Li and Kreas.

Kreas crawled forwards across the terrain on his deformed feet. His movements smooth and calculated as he slunk close to the ground, the sun shining off his glossy black coat. Li followed after him, walking gracefully.

Kreas stopped suddenly, sniffing the ground vigorously and laughing like a hyena. Kreas suddenly became still. He extended a single claw with all the gentleness one would think such a creature would lack.

He lifted his hand, draped over the claw, was a single long white hair.

Lucas and Drake stayed with Reuben for three hours until they were asked to leave at five, Lucas promising to return at six-thirty later that day. The doctors were apparently still not yet happy about releasing him because the tingling in his fingers had not stopped, and they wanted to keep an eye on him. But

tomorrow, tomorrow Reuben said that he would leave, whether the doctors allowed it or not.

Lucas and Drake trailed out of the hospital, the automatic doors closed behind them, as Lucas turned to Drake to speak.

'Where are you going now?'

'I'm going to meet Lauralie' Drake replied.

'I thought you were going to see your girlfriend.'

'I am' Drake winked, 'but I'm going to see Lauralie first. I've got a little surprise for her' he said, nudging Lucas' arm.

'Is she going to like this surprise?' Lucas asked dubiously.

'She will….' Drake replied nonchalantly. 'Perhaps not at first.'

'Right' Lucas mumbled slowly. 'Listen Drake, I'll see you around ok? I should be going.'

'I'll see you around' Drake oozed smugly. 'See you Monday.'

'See you tomorrow. And…don't do anything stupid.'

'I won't, and don't worry about Reuben' Drake waved at him. 'He'll be fine.'

Drake clapped his hands suddenly, rubbing them together vigorously and smiling with mischief.

'This is going to be fun. Oh I can't wait to see the look on her face.'

Lucas nodded as Drake strode away. Lucas turned, heading in the opposite direction he wandered down the street.

There was nothing for him to do, and he felt bored and lost without Reuben by his side. He decided to

wander the town, with lack of anything else to do. It was Sunday today, and the streets were mostly quiet. He wandered for many minutes, not wanting to go home. He went where his feet took him, never slowing down. He walked on.

Lauralie's face lit up the moment she saw Drake. She jumped off the wall of the fountain and ran over to him.

'Drake! It's great to see you, what took you so long?'

She was looking as beautiful as ever today, wearing high moss coloured boots, a black skirt and a red and green patterned top that clung to her gorgeous figure.

'You look nice today' Drake commented. 'Are you dressing up for someone?'

'What?' Lauralie laughed, raising an eyebrow at him in amusement. 'What are you talking about? These are my regular clothes. Are you hitting on me? Anyway you didn't answer my question. What took you so long?'

'Sorry, it was um….traffic.'

'But you walked' she said cocking her head slyly. 'Are you teasing me?'

Drake grinned wordlessly, taking her by the arm and walking with her.

'What's gotten into you?' she asked suspiciously. 'You're up to something.'

'Just walk with me' he answered. 'There are two people I want you to meet; and who very much want to meet you.'

'What? Lauralie frowned. 'Who? What are you up to Drake?'

He led her to another place not too far away, walking slowly through the streets. Around them people wandered back and forth as they drifted from one shop to the next, sitting on the benches outside or drinking at the coffee shops.

'It's pretty here today' Lauralie said absently. 'I love this town.'

'I know' Drake said patting her arm. 'You do love to tell me that.'

They continued to walk.

It was just around the next corner, that Lauralie met her surprise.

She gasped, as she saw approaching her, a young man with a rose on his neck and red streaks in his white hair. Beside him was another, shorter with light brown hair and startling blue eyes, like his companion.

It was the street-dancing brothers.

'Lauralie' Drake said leaning into her, 'these are the brothers, Adrian and Diz.'

'It is a pleasure to meet you' the oldest one said. 'My name is Adrian.' He leant forwards in a bow and took her hand in his, kissing the back of her hand in an old fashioned manner, standing with one arm behind his back.

It reminded Lauralie suddenly of something she had read in a book.

Behind Adrian, his younger brother Diz smirked back at her as she blushed; he rested a hand on his hip casually.

Adrian lifted his head to hers, drawing uncomfortably close, as if he were about to kiss her. Lauralie terrified simply froze.

'Would it be too daring for me' he began, 'to ask such a beautiful young lady her name?'

'…um it's……Lauralie.'

'Just as I expected' Adrian winked, 'a beautiful name, for a beautiful girl.'

Lauralie held her breath, unable to think of anything appropriate to say. The younger boy Diz tutted shaking his head, approaching them he tapped his brother's arm lightly with the back of his hand.

'Adrian, leave the poor girl alone and give her some space.'

He addressed her in turn as Adrian stepped back from her.

'I'm Diz; it's nice to meet you.' He smiled and winked at her, stepping forward and shaking her hand formally. 'This is my older brother' Diz said. 'He's already introduced himself. You could probably tell he's older can't you? He's so much taller than me.'

Diz gave a boyish little chuckled, shoulders shaking, he sighed calming himself.

Lauralie was completely thrown off by the brother's different attitudes. Not only did they look completely different, but in behaviour they were polar opposites.

'So what about you?' Diz asked. 'Have you lived here all your life? Or are you just visiting the town?'

'Well' Drake clapped Lauralie roughly on the back, making her jump. 'I had better be going now, my girlfriend Eleanor is expecting me' he explained to the brothers with a nod. 'I'm sure I can leave you in the capable hands of these fine young gentlemen' he said to Lauralie.

She tensed suddenly with cheeks red and shot him a glare that told him she was swearing in her head to kill him later.

'Don't you worry' Adrian said dramatically. 'I will care for this fair young maiden and take her under my wing.'

Diz gave his older brother a sceptical look. 'What are you in a pantomime or something?'

'I'll see you later' Drake tipped his forehead at them. 'Have fun Lauralie!' he called back, 'I know they'll look after you!'

'Come' the older brother Adrian said, gently taking Lauralie by the arm. 'Let's go someplace fun.'

Adrian led her away, with Diz skipping behind them.

Drake was laughing all the way to the train station as he went.

Alone with his thoughts, Lucas wandered through the town, avoiding the busiest parts and heading to places evermore quieter. Finally he reached the edge of the town, where he could walk no further. Not even realising where his feet had taken him, Lucas glanced up now, seeing the ocean before him. He was at the

harbour, which was deserted at this time. The ocean was calm, rocking gently the boats that were docked. Lucas stood for a moment, casting his gaze out onto the surface of the water. He turned, walking one way near the edge of the water, passing the boats lined up beside him.

Serenity, Wind Dancer, Jill…

The boats ranged from small rowing boats to larger and more majestic ones, both new and old. It was interesting to see such a mix housed together. Like different breeds that shared the same space.

Lucas listened to his own footsteps as he walked, stepping over a bundle of old net that lay discarded in his path. Glancing up he suddenly saw something that caught him by surprise, and he automatically summoned his magic to him to protect himself.

He had spotted an aberrant, and it in turn had spotted him. It was a large beast, bearing a set of wings now folded neatly by its side. The aberrant used its wings to help it walk, having no legs at the front, instead having four at the back, two on each side of the body.

Lucas watched the aberrant as it casually walked past him. There was caution in its eyes, but it did not appear threatening in any way, merely minding its own business, as Lucas had been doing.

The aberrant turned its bony head forwards again, flicking its long tail. Lucas saw at the end of its tail was a claw, with three sharp fingers that almost waved at him as it moved.

Once the aberrant had passed, it turned back and lay down. Resting with its legs stretched out and its

head held high. Its eyes drooped shut, as if the aberrant was thinking of rest.

Lucas stared at it a moment longer, before releasing his magic and drifting away. He glanced back at it as he went, but the creature had not moved. It appeared to be fast asleep in its sitting position, bathing in the sun.

Lucas walked on for several more minutes, eventually forgetting about the aberrant entirely. The salty smell in the air was strong, but not unpleasant, and he was so taken with the atmosphere around him, that he almost didn't notice. It was rare to see someone here who was not a fisherman or who didn't own a boat. But on this day, there was a girl.

She was young, dressed all in black, with her black hair cut into a bob. She was sitting on the pier with her legs dangling off the edge. Lucas would have kept moving, but there was something else he saw that surprised him.

A toy, brought alive by magic. It hovered in the air beside the girl, and together they gazed out to sea silently as if they were hypnotised.

Lucas slowed to a stop, staring at the both of them for several second. After a time the girl looked around, as if she could feel his sight touching her. She gasped in surprise, caught off-guard. The girl brought her legs up and rose suddenly. Lucas could see fear and uncertainty in her. She stared back at him, as if waiting for him to do something. Her body was tense and her shoulders lifted. When Lucas didn't immediately speak she began to march away.

'Wait!'

The girl stopped, peering hesitantly back at him.

'You're a guardian.'

The girl's eyes grew wide, and she turned to face him properly.

'You're nearly right' the girl replied in a shy voice, holding herself and speaking to the floor.

'Can that person see me?' the toy asked the girl.

'Yes Pokie' she answered. 'I think he can.'

The toy whizzed around her in a circle, flying through the air and coming to sit on her shoulder. The thing regarded Lucas with an expressionless face that he found unsettling.

'You're not going to hurt me are you?' The girl asked.

'Hurt you?' Lucas was shocked at such a question. 'Why would I want to hurt you?'

'There are people' the girl whispered, 'who wish me harm.'

'What people?'

The girl fell silent, reluctant to answer.

'I've tried to fit in' she moaned. 'I've tried…but…all my life…'

She buried her face in her hands and began to cry. Lucas' heart jolted, and he felt suddenly uncertain, unsure of what to do. He had rarely been in the presence of a crying girl, but on those few occasions, there had always been others around to deal with it. But this time he was on his own.

'Hey' he spoke gently to her. 'It's ok. There's no need to be sad.'

He took a step towards her, slowly approaching.

She lifted her head when she felt a hand on her shoulder, seeing Lucas smiling at her nervously.

'Please don't cry' he said to her.

'I'm just afraid.' She wiped her eyes with the back of her hands.

'What's your name?' Lucas asked.

'It's um…Ebony' she said sniffing.

'And my name is Pokie!' the toy cried out, seemingly oblivious to Ebony's sadness.

'What is it?' Lucas asked, staring at the toy intently. 'I've never seen anything like it before.'

'He's my friend' Ebony replied, gathering herself together. 'I created him.'

The toy ascended in the air, flying in a circle around the two of them and coming to hover between them. Its arms pointed downwards as it cocked its head curiously at Lucas.

'Lucas.'

'Hm?'

'It's my name' he told Ebony. 'It's Lucas.'

'That's a nice name.'

'Thanks. Ebony's a nice name too.'

She smiled at him, reluctant to meet him in the eye and only glancing briefly up at him.

'You're not going to hurt me?' she asked again.

'No' Lucas answered.

'Promise?'

Lucas saw then how scared and uncertain she was, like him.

'I promise' he told her.

'There are people' she said, 'people who want to hurt me.'

'I am not one of them.'

She appeared to relax a little, holding a fist on her heart.

'I see that now.'

Lucas paused. An awkward silence passed between them while Lucas thought of something to say. Ebony stared calmly, as if she was now merely curious about him.

'You seem to be a kind and caring person' she said at last.

'What makes you say that?'

She shrugged. 'Most people barely even see me. You're the first person in my life I remember to show me true kindness.'

Lucas felt a tug in his heart then; a deep sadness for her. Had she spent most of her life alone? Lucas thought then of his brother, and how the two of them had always been together. When their mother was cruel to them, it didn't seem to matter, because they had each other.

'You don't have any brothers or sisters?' he asked.

She shook her head.

'You must have parents?'

'I……have foster parents, but I don't get along with them, I don't think they like me very much.'

'Why would you say that?'

Ebony shrugged again. 'They barely seem to notice me most of the time.'

'I know how that feels. My mother likes to pretend my brother and I don't exist. And I've never met my father.'

'I've never met my parents either' Ebony smiled sadly.

'So you're alone?'

'It's ok' Ebony said waving a hand at him shyly. 'Don't feel bad for me. I've got Pokie, he's been a great companion.'

'A stuffed toy isn't really a companion.'

'Hey!' the toy cried out indignantly.

'Will you stay with me?' Ebony asked Lucas, ignoring the toy. 'I mean…just for a while…or do you have somewhere to be.' Ebony quickly looked away blushing. 'I'm sorry. Forget I said that.'

'It's ok' Lucas said. 'I'd love to hang out with you.'

'Really?'

'I'll keep you company, you don't have to be alone. We guardians should stick together.'

'You're right' Ebony said straightening up. 'I feel can trust you. I don't know why I know this. I just know.' She began to fidget on the spot, kicking her feet and looking at the ground.

'Do you want to sit with me?' she asked. 'I like to watch the sea. It's so peaceful.'

'Alright' Lucas replied. 'If that's what you want.'

She gave him a nod, turning and walking back to the edge of the pier. She sat where she had been before, resuming her original position with the toy Pokie sailing through the air after her. Lucas followed, sitting a short distance away, giving her space. The toy landed on the ground between them, leaning into Ebony's body. Though Lucas could read no facial expression, its body-language did wonders in conveying a message. Pokie didn't like him very much, or to be more precise, he was jealous, scared Lucas was going to take Ebony away from him.

'Don't worry Pokie' Ebony cooed, 'I know you're there.'

The toy jumped up into her lap, turning in circles like a cat or dog about to nap, then lying down, head shoved into its fluffy tail.

'Pokie is bound to me' Ebony explained, 'I'm all he has.'

The thing appeared to be fast asleep in no time.

'Where did he come from?' Lucas asked Ebony.

'From my bedroom' she replied.

'How did he get there?'

'I carried him?'

'From where?'

'From outside.'

Lucas sighed, knowing he wasn't going to get any straight answers in that area of discussion.

Ebony continued to pet the toy lovingly, the way one might stroke a cat. Lucas thought of sparking conversation, though wanted to stay away from discussion of the toy that clearly dislike him. But Ebony spared him the effort.

'You said you had a brother' Ebony said.

'Yes.'

'Tell me about him, what's he like? I would like to have had a sibling growing up.'

'His name is Reuben. He's in hospital at the moment.'

'Oh no' Ebony said gazing at him. 'What happened?'

And so they talked for a short time, about nothing and everything. Lucas kept no secrets from her as he would have done talking to others. He told her

everything, even more than what he would have told his own girlfriend, because this one knew magic, he was able to relate to her better than anyone else. There was no need keeping anything back from her. On occasion Ebony laughed, and Lucas smiled, and so they formed a sort of bond between them. Two people who had until very recently been complete strangers to one another.

But then the time came where Lucas had to leave again. Ebony's expression grew forlorn as Lucas rose to a stand.

'If I need help' she said to him before he left, 'you'll help me won't you?'

'Yes' Lucas replied. 'If I can.'

'I hope your brother gets well soon.'

'Yeah' Lucas replied. 'Me too.'

Lucas made his farewells and left the harbour. He thought of her as he made his way back to the hospital. There was something about the girl, something unusual, though Lucas couldn't quite work out what it was. But all thoughts of her left him when he saw his brother, and for the meantime, he forgot all about her.

'Ohhhh thank god you're here!' Reuben called happily. 'The hours absolutely dragged, I've been sooooo booooooored…'

Lucas took the empty seat beside his brother's bed.

'How do you feel?' he asked Reuben.

Chapter Five

The Voice

Monday morning

'Oh my goodness! What happened to you?!'

Reuben scratched the back of his head sheepishly; his left arm still in a cast stood out obviously. The bruise on his cheek was still prominent and the bandage that had been taken off his head showed a very clear very tender looking graze that had started to scab over.

'I uh…' Reuben began awkwardly, '…fell over.'

'Fell over?!' Lauralie cried out dramatically scanning the rest of his body, seemingly looking for other injuries. She poked his left shoulder.

'Ow!' Reuben protested.

'What have you been getting up to? It wasn't that long ago since I saw you last. Did you fall out of a train or something?'

'I told you I'm fine' Reuben argued. 'I just fell.'

'Don't be ridiculous' Lauralie said puffing herself up. She leant forward, her ginger hair falling down over her shoulders. 'Do you take me for some kind of an idiot? And don't answer that' she added hastily.

Reuben grinned silently at her, but kept his lips sealed.

They were at college now, and having only seen them briefly over the weekend Lauralie sought them out immediately. Hunting them down like a sort of heat seeking sledgehammer to the face, her radar eyes scanning the heads of the crowd, she found them the second they arrived on the grounds.

'Leave him be' Lucas said to her. 'He's absolutely fine.'

'He doesn't look fine to me' Lauralie said accusingly, turning her attention onto Lucas. 'And why are you walking funny?' she poked his stomach, causing Lucas to wince.

'You're wearing a bandage?' she said speaking to his stomach and reaching a finger towards him to poke him again.

'Don't touch me' Lucas hissed angrily, slapping her hand away.

'You guys are hiding something from me' Lauralie whined, placing her hands on her hips.

'Mind your own business' Lucas growled.

She turned away from him pouting.

'Always the same short temper' she sighed absentmindedly. 'You never change do you Lucas?'

Reuben frowned in amusement at the two of them. He always found their interactions most amusing.

'Anyway' Lauralie continued brushing off her worry. 'Where's Drake anyway?'

'He should be in a bit later' Reuben told her. 'He doesn't have an early class today; he should be on the way back from his girlfriends by now.'

'Oh I forgot he's coming home a bit later this time' Lauralie said. 'Probably because he was seeing *yeeew* in hospital' she said pointing a finger in Reuben's face. 'Why didn't you tell me?! You know I would have come to see you at the drop of a hat.'

'How did you know I was in hospital?'

'Duh. They give you casts there? Where else could you get your arm bandaged up you silly thing? And I know you would have told Drake, he's practically family to you. I can put two and two together.'

She leant forward then and ruffled his hair affectionatly, like one would do to a puppy.

'I didn't want you to worry' Reuben replied, voicing the first excuse that came to his mind as he leant away from her. 'And besides,' his expression grew mischievous as he threw her a wink, 'I heard you had your time occupied by two fine young gentlemen.'

Lauralie went red.

'Drake told us' Reuben explained. 'Apparently they're both very handsome. So tell me, which one will you pick?'

She poked his bruised shoulder hard.

'Ow!'

'You know if you frown any harder' Lucas laughed at her, 'your eyebrows will meet in the middle.'

She balled her fists, shoulders raised, she was positively fuming.

'You're making fun of me' she whined.

'Yeah? And it's so easy' Lucas teased.

She turned on her heel and stormed away. Lucas watched her go with smug satisfaction as she headed towards her class.

'Good riddance' Lucas said clapping his hands together as if dusting them off.

'Hey Lucas' Reuben said.

'Yes?'

'Can I ask you something?'

Lucas looked to Reuben. 'What is it?'

'Did you find her? Rhian I mean?'

'No' Lucas replied, looking away. 'I believe she had already gone.'

'Where?'

'Who knows?' Lucas shrugged. 'I don't think we'll be seeing her again. Ever. It's a good thing I suppose, I'd hate to find out what I'd do if I ever got my hands on her…after she…' he trailed off, glancing at his brothers cast.

'We don't have class for another hour or so' Reuben said. 'Why don't we go to the train station to meet Drake?'

Lucas' mood seemed to lighten at this.

'Are you ok to run?' Reuben asked him. 'Has your wound healed yet?'

'Has yours?' Lucas replied teasingly. 'How about a race?'

'You're on.'

Lucas was off in an instant, quickly being caught up by Reuben. They ran side by side towards the gates of the college, Reuben shoving his brother lightly as Lucas struggled to keep up. The two travelled through the streets, winding through back alleys and over fences and through car parks, using all the familiar and hidden paths they had grown up to love, in this town they called home.

Lauralie arrived at her lecture early, all her anger from talking to Lucas had faded away by the time she sat at her desk, and she waited patiently for the others to arrive.

The lecture began, and as time wore on, Lauralie's attention began to waver. Her eyes slid around the room as she searched for something of more interest. It was then she noticed that Rhian's desk was empty. She spared it little thought, looking ahead again and not really listening to what the lecturer was saying. There was so much on her mind recently, and it became difficult at times to concentrate on any one thing. Her mind wandered, but then someone broke her train of thought. One of the girls beside nudged her and passed her a note.

Lauralie read it.

Oh no, not this again.

Handsome, self-absorbed and selfish, David, was a guy all the girls were chasing, but not Lauralie. Perhaps that was what attracted him to her. He had everything a person like him could want, well-off parents, natural good looks, and a charming and witty attitude that earned him loads of friends and tons of attention from the girls.

Pompous little prick.

He had been chasing her for the last few weeks now, and his confidence and unspoken belief that he was somehow better than most people was the number one thing that annoyed her most about him. She had seen him being quite unkind to several people who he felt had wronged him, a few of which were her own

friends. All of whom had suffered from broken hearts because of him. She had helped them recover.

After class he tagged her down before she had a chance to escape.

'For the last time the answer is no!'

He flashed her his most charming grin that would have set most girl swooning, and although Lauralie was suddenly consumed in a flurrying wave of annoyance, she couldn't stop herself thinking how white and perfectly shaped his teeth were.

Are those real?

'Come on babe, just stop playing hard to get.'

'I am *not* playing hard to get!' Lauralie snapped back. 'And don't call me babe.'

She made to leave, but suddenly was held back. He had grabbed her by the wrist.

Lauralie alarmed that he had turned physical with her, swiftly returned the favour with a well directed kick to the groin.

Surmise to say he let go of her. He fell to his knees, eyes watering. David moaned in agony, hunched over with his hands between his legs.

'You bitch…'

'And so the true self comes out' Lauralie declared, 'I always knew you had a temper on you.'

She ran off before he had time to do or say anything else, not wanting to be around when he finally regained himself, which judging by how hard she had kicked him wouldn't be anytime soon. But still…

People around stopped to stand and stare, one or two offered help, few even dared to laugh. But one figure who watched the scene unfold was not like the

others. She had nothing to do with the college or even this world. Her name was Shire.

A tall woman, she wore a dress of fine materials, white with a black sash bound tightly around her waist and a red garment that covered her shoulders. She stood and stared as a small crowd began to gather around the unfortunate boy. People who were walking away looked back over their shoulders, wondering what they had just missed.

Shire watched this, standing in plain sight, yet was unseen by anyone.

If anyone were to have seen her, they would have stopped and stared at her, for besides from wearing clothes that were different; her very being was different also. With skin that was almost pure white, her lips held little colour. But the most distinguishing feature about her, besides her long jagged azure blue hair which was tied in several knots and ponytails, were her eyes. She had the most unusual shade of burnished gold and yellow, with emerald shaded edges.

It was eye catching.

Her eyes would have drawn all the attention, almost making the rest of her jealous.

But it wasn't the boy kneeling on the ground in agony she watched, it was Lauralie.

The guardian hummed thoughtfully to herself, furrowing her brow. Two young couples passed very close by her, facing each other they didn't notice the strange woman who stood so near.

Shire unfolded her arms; turning away from the scene she left the grounds of the college. Casually sauntering through the streets she headed towards the

edge of the town, every person that passed by looked through her. But she paid no attention to any of them.

She met her fellow guardians, gathered beneath a bridge under a railway line that had for years been abandoned.

She paused to watch the fight that was before her. Again their group had run into the creatures Li and Kreas, and again they battled.

Li screamed like a banshee, a terrible pitch so deafening that it hurt the ears to listen to. She was pinned to the floor on her side by the aberrant-guardian, who struggled to hold her down. His wings flailed as he fought for balance. Li caught the aberrant's arm as he made to swipe at her, sinking her teeth deep into his flesh. But the aberrant didn't cry out, he slashed at her stomach with his free arm, and was jerked to the side as Li, still holding him by the arm, threw him off her. Beside them the red haired guardian battled with the creature known as Kreas, who was far quicker than his companion Li. Like an insect he clung to the walls and scuttled along the ground, his movement was rapid and perfectly controlled. Indigo had spent much of his energy blocking, protecting himself from the barrage of attacks that seemed to be never ending. Kreas moved with relentless speed. He cackled as if mocking his opponent, screeching and laughing like hyena. He leapt at the red haired guardian, flying through the air he covered a huge distance, crashing into him and pinning him down.

Shire found her way down from the tracks that ran across the bridge, and to the space below where the others fought. She stood beside her daughter Siren, who

had been watching from a safe distance the scene unfold.

'They jumped us' Siren explained gently, voicing no worry in her tone for her companions. 'They came out of nowhere.'

'Like hunters they stalk' Shire agreed glancing at her daughter.

Siren was a girl in her late teens, looking very much like her mother with pale skin which was almost snow-white, and lips of faded colour. Her azure hair was wavy and longer than her mothers, tied on one side of her head and reaching past her waist. Her eyes, though hidden now by the hood she wore, and the fringe that grew long, were however different from her mothers. They were void of bright colour, instead were a light and misty blue.

Siren clutched the orb she held tightly in her hands; it now flashed vividly, with many bright and fabulous colours.

Siren lowered the hood of her black cloak, brushing back her blue fringe to see clearer.

'I don't like any of this' she stated simply.

Noticing Shire, the fourth guardian had returned, Li alerted Kreas with a cry. Kreas stilled his anger and stopped his volley of charges immediately. Li shook her head violently, snarling like a wolf. She turned and leapt away, Kreas followed after her in great bounds.

Indigo stuck his lance in the ground, snarling after them through bloodied teeth.

'That's it! Run back to your masters!' he hollered.

The creatures left only clouds of dust behind them as they went.

'At least we did some damage.' The aberrant released his grip on his weapons, using his magic to make them vanish into thin air. He turned calmly to Shire.

'Did you find anything?' the aberrant Culture asked her.

'No' Shire replied with a shake of the head. 'The one we seek is very elusive.'

'She is here' Siren clarified staring into her orb. 'I can *feel* her.'

'Of course she is here' Indigo replied, moving closer to them. 'She is trapped. There is nowhere for her to run. I just wish our search would not be constantly hindered by these beasts' he said, indicating the direction that Li and Kreas had fled.

'So if you found nothing' Culture asked Shire, 'why were you gone for so long?'

'I was watching.'

'Ha!' Indigo laughed, 'watching? Watching! Hey, she said she's was *watching*.'

The aberrant smiled, as if it was some kind of an inside joke that they shared.

Shire made no reaction. Instead she changed the subject.

'I think we should keep looking.'

'No' Indigo cut in, sweeping back his blood-red hair. 'I feel like we're trying to catch a single bird from a flock by hand, and we're doing it blind.'

'You're proposing we give up?' Shire asked.

'No' Indigo repeated. 'We have her trapped now.' He fell silent for a moment, before speaking again. 'We

need to sit and think about this. Or else we would be wasting time and effort.'

'You have something on your mind?' the aberrant asked.

'I'm thinking' Indigo replied. 'Why has she lingered here? The entire time we've been chasing her, she's always moved on quickly. Why has she stayed here so long to allow herself to become trapped like this?'

The other three listened silently in thought.

'Why indeed?' the aberrant purred. 'I feel a strange presence in this town, something I am drawn to…but I feel like I'm being pulled in different directions.'

Siren gasped suddenly, staring into the orb.

'What is it Siren?' her mother asked. 'Is something wrong?'

'I understand now' Siren said, 'I understand why we've struggled so much to find her, why the others have struggled too.'

'Why?' Indigo asked her slowly.

Siren raised her head; a strange look upon her face. 'Culture' she said to the aberrant. 'You said that you felt like you were being pulled in different directions.'

'Yes?' the guardian replied.

Siren looked back down to her orb. 'It's because there are two of them.'

'What?' Indigo gasped.

Beside her Shire tensed, and Culture blinked in surprise.

'I can see her' Siren breathed. 'She is a polar opposite of the one we were originally chasing. This new one is dressed all in black.'

Siren saw a second figure appear in the orb, standing beside the one dressed in black. She lowered her head, her blue fringe falling over her face again.

'I see a guardian with her' Siren whispered. 'He is young and inexperienced.'

She narrowed her eyes, staring down in wonder.

'Lucas is his name.'

The brothers ran through the town. Lucas slowed to a stop after a time, waving at Reuben to do the same.

'Alright you win' Lucas gasped, hunched forwards and holding his side. 'I can't…I can't go on anymore…'

'How's the injury doing?' Reuben asked, turning back to him.

'Getting better' Lucas answered straightening up again. 'It feels a hell of a lot better than it did the other day.' He smiled. 'I think it's even stopped bleeding.'

'Good.'

'But can we walk from here?' Lucas asked. 'I'm not sure I'm up for running and jumping around anymore.'

'Sure' Reuben nodded.

They ambled side by side, walking at a gentle pace through the town as they headed to the train station. But before they came close to the station, Lucas pulled back, spotting a short distance away a figure he recognised.

'Ebony?'

She bowed her head shyly, realising she had been spotted. Lucas changed direction, striding up to her. Reuben hesitated for a moment before following,

wondering in his head who this new person was. She smiled at Lucas, but appeared to become a little nervous as Reuben approached.

'What are you doing here?' Lucas asked her, standing in the shaded patch before the coffee shop where Ebony was hovering. Ebony clung to the gate behind her, leaning into the metal bars like they would offer her some sort of protection.

'I found you' she uttered. 'It was all by chance. I was wandering the town for hours.'

'Why?' Lucas asked her.

'I…' Ebony averted her attention. 'I…I wanted to see you.'

Reuben glanced sideways, giving his brother a devious look.

'Lucas…' he said in a mock tone, 'you didn't tell me you met a lady friend. What *were* you doing when I was in hospital? Oh! But what would Sian think?'

Lucas grimaced, speaking patiently as his eyebrow twitched in annoyance.

'You know it's not like that' he huffed. 'God you're starting to sound like Lauralie.'

'Who's Lauralie?' Ebony asked him.

'Nobody' Lucas answered shortly. 'Just another stupid girl.'

'Another?' Ebony spoke tentatively, eyes beginning to shimmer.

'I mean' Lucas began, '…that is…I didn't mean…I wasn't calling *you* stupid' he said hurriedly. He glanced at his brother for support.

'No keep going' Reuben told him. 'Soon you'll need a ladder to get out of this grave you're digging for yourself.'

'Why do I even ask for your help anyway?' Lucas muttered to him, shaking his head and narrowing his eyes at him.

Ebony blushed, avoiding looking at either of them now. Her companion, the toy named Pokie who had been hiding behind her up until that point, suddenly made itself known.

'You can see me as well?' The toy said to Reuben as he noticed the surprised expression on his face. 'You must be a guardian too.'

'What the hell…?' Reuben exclaimed. 'Hey' he smiled suddenly, looking at the girl now in a whole new light. 'You're a guardian too. That's great so are we.'

'Reuben' Lucas said to him gathering himself. 'This is Ebony and Pokie' he said, indicating the toy.

'Hello Reuben' Ebony smiled politely. 'Lucas has told me so much about you.'

'He has, has he?' Reuben said raising an eyebrow. 'Good things I hope.'

'Of course' Ebony replied.

Reuben's attention drifted past her, and he glanced with curiosity at the toy again.

'What's wrong with you?' the toy spat bitterly as Reuben began to stare. 'It's like you've never seen magic before.'

'I'm sorry' Ebony said in a hushed voice. 'He gets a little jealous at times.'

'I can tell' Reuben frowned sceptically at the thing floating in the air. It didn't have any facial expressions

of any kind, but its body language said more than enough.

The toy didn't like him either.

'So' Lucas began speaking to Ebony, 'what are you doing out here? Why were you looking for me?'

'Lucas' Ebony began uncertainly. 'You said that you'd help me if ever I needed it.' She looked at the ground, holding her hands behind her back. 'Well…I think I need your help now.'

They headed home instead of going to the train station, Ebony walking with them. Once they reached the apartment, Lucas seeing how tired Ebony was, allowed her to sleep in their mother's bedroom. They had talked briefly before Ebony lay down to rest. Lucas placed a thin blanket over her, drawing the curtains shut. He paused only briefly to watch as Pokie padded in circles beside Ebony on the bed, before lying down next to her. Lucas turned away, closing the bedroom door quietly, leaving Ebony and Pokie alone together.

'She looks like she hasn't slept all night' Lucas spoke to his brother in a hushed voice as they stood before the bedroom door.

'Is she ok?' Reuben immediately began to interrogate in a whisper.

Lucas nodded. 'Apparently she's going through a hard time right now.'

'Nothing that time wouldn't mend right?' Reuben said enthusiastically.

'She said her foster parents don't see her anymore' Lucas continued. 'Literally. Not even when she yells and screams.' He shook his head. 'I tell you what Reuben…there's something strange about her. I know when a guardian uses magic most other people are unable to see it, but I've never heard of this before.'

'*Can* guardians be invisible to other people?' Reuben asked.

'If they chose to be I suppose' Lucas shrugged. He walked away shaking his head. 'I don't know. Maybe time will solve this mystery.'

Reuben followed his brother into the bedroom they shared. It was a small apartment that they lived in, and there was not a lot of room to spare.

'What if our mother comes back and finds her' Reuben asked. 'It'll be like the three little bears…sort of. Who's been sleeping in *my* bed?'

'I'm not afraid of her anymore' Lucas replied simply, taking a seat at the desk against the far wall.

Reuben marched over to the bunk bed, stepping over the messy pile of clothes and books on the floor. He collapsed onto the lower bed, lying back with his hands behind his head, staring up at the dusty dream catcher above him.

'Are you starting another one?' he asked Lucas absentmindedly.

'Yup.'

Lucas adjusted the light on the table briefly before returning his attention to the little metal ball he held. About the size of a golf-ball, it had many shallow ridges and grooves running upon it, with what looked like tiny screw heads protruding out from the surface. He placed

this one to the side, picking up another piece of what looked like scrap metal. This one was shaped like a burnt piece of paper that had curled and scrunched up as it blackened in a fire.

'Are you making another smoke bomb?' Reuben sighed deeply.

'No' Lucas replied after a while. 'I'm making something else.'

'What does it do?'

'It explodes when you pick it up' Lucas said, 'and magic wires tie you down so you can't escape.'

'Does it work?'

'I don't know' Lucas shrugged. 'I'm still designing it, and I haven't had a chance to test it yet.'

Reuben hummed thoughtfully, tapping his foot against the wall.

'I like the purple smoke from the smoke bomb' Reuben said.

'Me too.'

The desk was scattered with loose bits of metal, pots of paint, brushes and a variety of strange substances. Lucas pushed some of these things aside, creating more space for himself. He lifted the item he held in his hand, heating the metal in his fingers by magic. He began to work.

'Are we going back to college later?' Reuben asked him.

'I don't think so.'

'What about the exams?'

'To me they seem to matter less and less with every passing day' Lucas replied.

'Yeah' Reuben said. 'I feel the same.' He sighed deeply again. 'What about Ebony? Is she staying here now?'

'I suppose' Lucas said. 'Until she and her foster parents make up with each other.'

Reuben stared up at the dream catcher.

'I bet they'll make up with each other in no time' Reuben said. 'And then everything will be ok.'

As the days turned into weeks, and Reuben found Lucas spending more and more time with Ebony. She was reserved and quiet, timid amongst strangers, and although she was friendly enough, Reuben began to form a gradually and increasing resentment towards her. Nowadays she took up most of his brother's time, and her foster parents showed no sign of acknowledging her, let alone wanting her back. And so she stayed at their apartment, her only possessions were a few clothes and other meagre things. She spent most of her time either at the flat or with Lucas out somewhere, Reuben feeling more and more like he was simply tagging along. Reuben began to get suspicious of her when he found her, on more than one occasion drifting into their bedroom. She saw the things on the desk and grew curious. Reuben quickly drove her out, subjected to harsh whispered words from his brother afterwards.

A simmering tension began to bubble.

It had been many weeks since Reuben, Lucas and Drake had visited the abandoned hotel within the industrial estate to practice their magic. Drake was spending more and more time with his girlfriend

Eleanor, helping her revise for the coming exams, as was Lucas with Sian for the same reason. Lucas and Drake both travelled together on the train most weekends to see them, Lucas doing so whenever he could afford it. Ebony too scared to leave the town chose to stay in the apartment, Reuben agreed somewhat grudgingly to Lucas' suggestion that he should keep her company. On that occasion one Saturday morning, Reuben found himself sitting in silence and staring at her. The clock ticked loudly on the wall as he fidgeted with his cast.

'You don't have to stay here you know' Ebony said politely, feeling a little out of her depths and lost without Lucas to keep her company. 'I'm not keeping you from going out.'

'Lucas told me to keep an eye on you' Reuben said stubbornly, perhaps not realising how stupid he was being. 'I have to stay here.'

'Oh.'

Ebony bowed her head.

Reuben sighed, leaning back in the comfy armchair and closing his eyes.

I wonder what Lucas is doing now, he thought.

The town Eleanor and Sian lived in was one more open and less crowded than the one Drake and Lucas came from. There were fewer large shops to attract crowds, fewer abandoned buildings to attract the wrong people, and the town itself was generally cleaner and more pleasant.

Sian turned, leaning against the rails on the edge of the harbour, holding the books in her arms. The wind was strong, buffeting her clothes and hair this way and that.

It was a bright town, built right next to the sea with a wide river running right through the middle. Small ferries channelled people to and fro all day and night, and now in summer, there were more tourists visiting to see the attractions. From a distance Sian watched a family as they explored the deck of an old navy ship, the children pointing with excitement at its huge masts. It was a beautiful ship, one of the many attractions the local museum had to offer.

'Sian, come away from the edge' Lucas said to her.

Lucas, Drake and Eleanor sat on the steps at the base of a statue of an old man, he leaning forwards on a rope with a ringing bell at the top.

'It's too windy there' Lucas called over to her. 'You'll lose your notes.'

She swung her arms round and ambled over to him.

'Do you think it's such a good idea doing this outside?' Eleanor said tidying up her papers which were trying to fly away. 'It's always so windy here; we could lose all our notes. And I'm not swimming to get them back.'

'Hey, I'd make the most of it' Drake yawned twirling his pen, 'before long they'd have us cooped up in exam halls like battery chickens, labouring away on something most of us would probably never use again in our lives.'

Sian planted herself right onto Lucas' lap where his books had been sitting open; he had been halfway through the paragraph until she came along. She was now applying lipstick in a mirror and ignoring him completely.

'You know you're not making this easy for me' Lucas droned at her.

His phone began to buzz in his pocket and he flipped it out. It was a message from Jacob.

Just got bak. Where r u guys?

Lucas began to text a response, hands behind Sian so she could not read what he wrote.

Gr8 hope u had fun. Any sign of any magc yt?

He received a quick and short response.

No

Lauralie threw her head back laughing hysterically. She was sitting in-between the two brothers Adrian and Diz. Since that day Drake had been so kind enough to introduce them to her, the three had spent more and more time together, and Lauralie was becoming very familiar with both of them and their quirky habits. It still amazed her how different the two brothers were from each other.

The park bench on which they rested was positioned before a large fountain. It was a scenic spot within the town, made up of gravel paths with borders of flowers arranged by their colour, lots of grass you weren't allowed to walk on, and beautiful trees planted everywhere. The three sat beneath a weeping willow.

Tiny patches of light that fought through the leaves of the tree were scattered in patters around them. Lauralie took a deep breath, smelling the scene of the flowers in the air. The park was a little piece of nature within their home town.

'I love the birds' Lauralie beamed, 'they're really beautiful.'

She shredded the slice of bread into tiny pieces and cast her hand out. The sparrows and starlings came flitting down, picking at her feet.

'They're not as beautiful as you' Adrian purred.

He turned his wrist up as he faced her, uncurling his fingers in a graceful action. And like a magician, smooth and elegant he flicked a beautiful red rose from his sleeve and presented it to her.

She laughed even more now, her voice like glistening dew on a winters morning.

'You're so funny' she said taking it from him and smelling it.

'How long have you been hiding that there I wonder? Waiting for the right moment to show me?'

'I've got something for you I think you'd like more' Diz voiced sweetly from her other side.

He handed her a single boiled sweet.

'It's orange like your hair' he said.

Lauralie blushed and grinned at him; Adrian leant back and cast him a comical frown.

'Really?' he asked his younger brother.

'Oh Diz that's so sweet of you' Lauralie said taking it. 'You're so cute!' she squeaked.

Diz flashed his brother a smug grin. Adrian rolled his eyes.

'So when are you going to teach me how to dance?' Lauralie demanded. 'It was just amazing watching you for the first time, the timing…the way you moved…the way you danced *together*…'

'Oh my dear' Adrian said in a serious tone, 'it's not just simple movement; it's an art, an expression of our being. There are some things in today's world that cannot be felt in words alone.'

Adrian stood up and walked a short distance away from her, hands in his pocket, the birds scattered.

'The unique characteristic of street dancing my dear allows one to use their own personal style and influences in his steps.' Adrian gave a brief demonstration.

'It's not a dance that's rigid in its rules as to what exactly it should constitute, its open to the imagination.'

He cast his arms open in a dramatic fashion.

'Are you ready to begin?'

'It's really fun' Diz said leaning forward, his words formed round a lollipop he had materialised out of nowhere. 'Adrian and I spent *years* practicing to get to where we are now, so many hours every single day. Right Adrian?'

Adrian lowered his arms. 'That's right little brother.'

'Where did you get that lolly from?' Lauralie asked Diz suddenly distracted.

'I've got loads' he grinned at her. 'Want some?'

Adrian put his hands on his hips; he shook his head sighing; then gave a huff of amusement.

'My dear girl' he said. 'You will be the death of me.'

Shire saw her from a distance; Lauralie was sitting talking to two young men on a bench by the fountain. Shire had watched them for a long while from the opposite end of the park, fascinated by Lauralie's every move. But something distracted her then. A voice carried on the wind.

Shire raised her head, turning away from her newfound obsession and looking towards the edge of the town.

Trapped in a world, full of betrayal
Only the angels trusted
Demons are fleeing, fearful, frightened
Weapons and swords now rusted

'I can hear her…' Shire breathed.

Chapter Six

Crystal's Warning

Lucas was woken early the next Saturday morning by his mobile ringing. He rolled over with a groan, leaning over the rails of his bunk bed.

'Reuben.'

'Hmm?' his brother groaned in the bed below, shifting in his sleep.

'Reuben can you pass my phone?'

Reuben did so, moving in autopilot. Now free from his cast, taken off the night before, he raised himself up easily and took the mobile from the bedside table. He handed it to Lucas; his injury had healed by now also, the deep gashes that had been in his side were gone. Only faint scars remained.

Reuben collapsed back on his bed and went back to sleep as Lucas flipped the mobile open, answering the call.

'Yes Drake?'

'Hey I'm so glad you answered your phone' Drake sang merrily back. 'Are you still in bed?'

'What do you want?'

'I was just wondering why we hadn't met up in so long? We haven't practiced our magic in ages; do you have a new girl in your life or something?'

'Kind of' Lucas replied flatly.

'Really?' Drake answered in surprise, clearly not expecting that kind of answer. 'Did you split with Sian; you know she's apparently expecting you to visit her tomorrow?'

'No' Lucas said, defensively now. 'I didn't split with her. I just…I've found another guardian.'

'Really?' Drake repeated. 'You mean you've found a new guardian and you didn't tell me?'

'She's a little shy.'

'I don't care I want to meet her. Is she cute?'

'Drake.'

'When can I meet her?'

'Drake.'

'I know! I'll see you at your place. Be there in about…an hour?'

'Drake.'

'Alright an hour and a half. I'll see you soon. Bye!'

And he hung up.

Lucas sighed, handing the mobile back to Reuben in the bed below him.

'He's getting more and more like Lauralie by the day.'

'Was that Drake?' Reuben asked opening his eyes and taking the mobile.

'Yeah' Lucas answered. 'He'll be around here soon. He wants to meet Ebony.'

'Oh' Reuben said turning over. 'Wake me up in ten minutes.'

'Are you sure this is a good idea?' Ebony asked nervously, holding her hands before her and scratching at her palms nervously.

'Don't worry' Lucas smiled reassuringly at her as she gave him a worried look. 'Drake is a nice guy. I'm sure you two will get along fine.'

'But what if he doesn't see me?'

'He's a guardian' Lucas said. 'Like me, like Reuben. Of course he will see you.'

'Ok' Ebony said looking down. 'If you say so.'

Pokie flew through the air between them, descending he placed himself into her arms and stared at Lucas in a way that would have been a glare, had the toy been able to do so.

It was shortly after that, there came a knock at the door and Drake entered.

'Hello' he said to the brothers, glancing at one, then the other. And then he looked at Ebony, his face breaking into a smile. 'So you must be the new guardian that Lucas has found.' He strode across the room, weaving his way around the coffee table and seating himself next to Ebony upon the sofa.

'My name is Drake' he said extending a hand. 'What's your name?'

'Ebony' she replied, beaming back at him. 'You can see me?'

'See you?' Drake echoed, raising an eyebrow in confusion. 'Of course I can see you.'

'Ebony is having trouble with being noticed' Lucas explained to Drake. 'She says that people don't see her.' He glanced at Ebony. 'Isn't that right?'

'It is I'm afraid' she said bowing her head shyly. 'Most people seem to look right through me; even my foster parents completely ignore me now.'

'That's terrible' Drake said.

'It's ok' Ebony replied looking up at Lucas. 'I've been feeling much better since I met Lucas. And Reuben' she said glancing at him. 'I've never had such wonderful company before. I've never met anyone before who understands magic like they do.'

Drake frowned at her, biting his lip in thought. 'I've not heard of a guardian being unseen unless by choice. How long has this been happening?'

'Only recently' she said. 'In the last few months or so.'

'That *is* odd' Drake mused, scratching his chin. 'Do you use magic often?'

'Very rarely' Ebony said. 'And only in small amounts.'

Drake hummed thoughtfully. 'You know I saw several aberrants on my way here' he digressed, speaking to the brothers. 'It was very odd. The closer to the flats I got, the more often I saw them. I must have seen about…six?'

'They are drawn to me' Ebony said.

'Eh?'

'The aberrants' she explained. 'They are drawn to my powers. I don't know why. It's just always been that way. It's been getting worse lately though.'

'Drawn to you…?' Lucas mumbled.

Lucas thought back to that day when they first met. He remembered then seeing an aberrant nearby, just before he saw Ebony. He and Reuben had also seen

several near their home since Ebony first started living with them. He understood now.

Pokie then made a move beside her, sitting up and facing this new stranger. Drake's attention immediately snapped to the toy.

'Did I just see that move?' he asked the room.

Ebony lifted the toy, sitting it on her lap, and for the moment the talk about aberrants was forgotten.

'This is Pokie' Ebony explained. 'I used magic to make him come to life, he keeps me company. I made him when I was feeling lonely.'

'I make her happy' Pokie said. 'And no one is taking her away from me.'

Drake gave an uncertain glance towards Lucas.

'He gets a bit jealous' Lucas shrugged lazily.

Reuben looked on in silence.

'I have an idea' Drake suddenly declared. 'Why don't we invite over Jacob and Lauralie? That would be fun wouldn't it?'

'Only if Lauralie doesn't come' Lucas droned.

'Why do you want them to come over' Reuben asked.

'Well' Drake wagged a finger at Reuben knowingly. 'One is a guardian, and the other isn't. Maybe we can find out what's happening to you' he said turning to Ebony. 'I'll just give them a call.'

He left the room quickly, taking out his mobile as he did so.

Lucas glanced sideways at Ebony. 'What do you think of him?'

She shrugged. 'He seems nice.'

'I told you you two would get along.'

Ebony shuffled in her seat, fiddling nervously with the hem of her skirt. Pokie was by her side, standing with his front feet leaning against her as if to comfort.

'Are you sure I'm ready for this?' she asked Lucas.

Lucas cocked his head at her. 'They're not going to hurt you.'

Drake returned a moment later. 'They'll be here shortly' he declared. 'They're on their way right now.'

Not long after that there came another knock at the door and Lucas made his way towards it. Reuben, picking up some of Ebony's tension sat rigid in his seat. Drake sat back in his chair thoroughly relaxed, tapping his foot casually.

The door was opened, and in came a beaming Lauralie, and a cautious looking Jacob.

'Awww hai!' Lauralie said bounding in. 'It's so great to see you three. It's been ages!'

Drake and Reuben lifted their heads at them, smiling and nodding in acknowledgment. Jacob entered the room after her, immediately noticing the unfamiliar figure of Ebony. Lucas closed the door behind them.

'Hey Jacob' Lucas nodded to him. 'Did you enjoy your holiday?'

'Oh so now you're ignoring me?' Lauralie protested loudly, turning to Lucas with a glare and her hands on her hips. 'Why are you always so mean to me? Actually I'm surprised you invited me over. I thought you didn't like me.'

'I don't' Lucas said flatly.

She made a face at him, sticking her tongue out and showing him and palm of her hand.

'If you don't have anything nice to say then I'm not going to listen to you' she said turning away from him.

'So how are you guys?' she sang, looking from Reuben to Drake. 'I see you have your cast off Reuben. That must be nice for you. And Drake, how've you been?'

Drake glanced sideways at Ebony who sat silently next to him; she gave him a worried look.

'Guys' Jacob spoke. 'You didn't tell me you had company.'

'This is Ebony' Drake introduced, looking back at Jacob and Lauralie. 'She's a guardian.'

'A guardian?' Jacob repeated staring at the girl dressed all in black. He smiled uncertainly, quiet and reserved when it came to strangers. 'Hello' he said.

Jacob hesitated then as he noticed the toy, hovering in the air beside Ebony. It cocked its head at him, but did not speak.

'My name is Jacob' he said to Ebony. 'We all go to college together.'

'I'm Ebony' she replied, hunching her shoulders and looking down at her lap, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

'That's a pretty name' Jacob replied. 'Is that a stone?'

'Actually it's a wood' Ebony smiled.

'You know I should thank you Drake' Lauralie said to him, completely ignoring Ebony and making no indication that she had noticed her existence at all. 'I was so mad at first when you left me with Diz and

Adrian, but I'm not mad anymore. In fact we seem to be getting along quite well.'

'That's strange' Lucas mumbled, glancing at the back of Lauralie's head as she launched into a full speech about all the wonderful things she and the brothers Diz and Adrian had gotten up to since they first met. 'Not only does she seem to be unable to see you' he said to Ebony, 'she seems to be unable to hear any reference to you.'

'I told you' Ebony mumbled sadly.

'What are you guys talking about?' Jacob frowned at Lucas.

'The reason we invited you' Reuben explained to Jacob, 'is because we wanted to know if you could see Ebony, and if Lauralie could see her too.'

'Lauralie doesn't seem to have noticed you' Jacob said to Ebony, furrowing his brow in confusion and glancing at Lauralie as she rambled on, speaking to Drake who smiled back at her, feigning interest.

'I know' Ebony sighed. 'It's why I can't live with my foster parents anymore.'

'That's terrible.' Jacob sympathised.

'I know' Ebony sighed again, resting her chin on the ball of her hand. 'It didn't used to be this bad. But now it seems that the only people who even notice me anymore are guardians.'

'I've never heard of that happening before' Jacob mused.

'Neither have we' Lucas added.

They fell silent then, watching Lauralie as she continued to drone on and on to Drake about the street

dancing brothers. Drake appeared to be trying his best to listen, but at this point his eyes had glazed over.

Lucas turned from the room, drifting into the kitchen. Reuben followed after him as Jacob struck up a conversation with Ebony. The brothers left the room to blurred conversation that faded into white noise.

Lucas let out a deep and weary breath, leaning forwards on the kitchen counter and staring vacantly out of the window.

'Are you alright?' Reuben asked him.

Li sniffed the ground furiously, hot on the trail of their prey and feeling more determined than ever to reach the end of the hunt. She lifted her fox-like head, letting out a series of whooping howls. She called her companion to her side. Kreas was there in an instant, he too picked up the scent Li had, and he began to chatter and cackled excitedly. Li led the way, her long legs giving her a wide gallop, Kreas scuttling after her.

They ran through the town one after the other. Crossing busy roads and leaping over cars and over the heads of the people in the town, all of whom were completely oblivious to their presence. They skidded to a halt outside a block of flats. Li lifted her head high, sniffing the air with lips curled up, revealing sharp canine-like teeth. Kreas skulked beside her, hissing through his needle teeth as Li stood rigid beside him with a paw lifted.

'It's here' Kreas hissed eagerly. 'It's very close now.'

Lucas tensed suddenly, seeing through the window two creatures skulking in the alley just below the window. Two creatures he had not seen before, creatures that were not of this world.

Simultaneously the beasts lifted their heads, as if sensing his gaze. They spotted Lucas through the window, snarling silently and running out of sight, heading towards the entrance doors of the flat.

Lucas slowly straightened, backing away from the window; he began to pant, panicking silently inside.

'What's wrong?' Reuben asked, worry laced his tone. He had not seen what Lucas had seen.

Lucas turned to his brother, paling. 'They're coming.'

The explosion caught them completely off guard as the front door was blown inwards. Shards of splintered wood cut the skin of those in the room as they cowered in fear and shock. Ebony lowered her arm she had raised to protect herself, seeing the beasts advancing into the room. She gasped, drawing back in fright. Pokie seeming to have no sense of safety rose higher in the air to get a better look at the new arrivals.

Kreas circled around from behind Li, creeping with his body hunched close to the ground. He screeched joyfully at the sight of Ebony, red eyes pupil-less glaring at her. Li was the first to attack; lunging forwards she snatched the toy Pokie from the air and decimated it. Shaking it violently from side to side, ignoring Ebony's cry of despair. Li dropped the lifeless toy, its spirit now fled, her attention moved to those within the room.

Together the two creatures attacked, targeting two individuals, the strongest and the weakest beings in the room.

Lucas and Lauralie.

Li made a huge jump, leaping in one bound right over the sofa, over the heads of the others and into the kitchen where Lucas stood. She clashed with his defence, teeth striking a hard object that Lucas had summoned by magic, a sort of short lance, glowing blue in colour.

Kreas went straight for Lauralie, but was barrelled sideways by Drake as he ran to defend her, Lauralie shaking and frozen in horror could only watch. *She can see*, Ebony realised with horror glancing briefly towards her. *She can at last see magic*.

Drake grabbed the creature by the ears, forcing its small head downwards and away from him; the beast was hissed furiously at him through its teeth. It jerked its head from side to side, seemingly trying to break free. The creature began to spin, turning over and over again in circles, trying to free himself from Drake's grasp. The table in the centre of the room was struck by one of Kreas's flailing limbs, the wood splintered and the glass shattered. Jacob could only watch the struggle helplessly beside Lauralie and Ebony, wishing desperately that his magic would come to him.

In the kitchen Li swung her head again in attack, but was deflected another two times, this time by both brothers fighting now as one.

Kreas pushed Drake to the side once more, then without warning swung his head sharply the opposite direction. Drake's fingers slipped from the ears of the

beast and he was thrown back when the creature swung its head back again the other way, hitting him and throwing him to the ground. Drake grimaced, picking himself up off the glass strewn floor. He threw a random spell towards the black creature. The magic struck Kreas on the forehead, but had as much effect it seemed as a fly bite.

'You're weak' Kreas hissed. 'A weak juvenile guardian.'

'It can speak?' Drake breathed in shock and awe.

Behind him Jacob stared transfixed, as if in a trance. Beside him Lauralie clung to his arm, her skin was a sickly shade; on his other side Ebony remained seemingly calm.

Li in the next room had ceased her attacks on the brothers. Instead backing off momentarily, calculating the situation. She began to advance once more into the small kitchen.

'What a surprise' she growled as she formed her words with her canine mouth, 'to find guardians so young, but so strong.'

Lucas narrowed his eyes at the beast. 'What are you?'

'Why, I'm a guardian like yourself' Li gleamed.

'What do you want?' Reuben asked.

Behind them Kreas knocked Drake off his feet again, trapping and bearing down on him joyfully. He pressed a great clawed hand upon his chest, pushing down with all his weight. Beneath him Drake gasped for air.

'We want' Li answered, 'the girl. The one in black.'

All eyes in the room turned to Ebony.

'Or else we kill all of you, and take her anyway' the beast Li finished.

'We start with this one' Kreas hissed, glaring down at Drake, who continued to struggle helplessly beneath his grasp.

Jacob snapped out of his trance then, blinking several times and shaking his head violently.

He moved forward, throwing out his hand. From the centre of Jacob's palm came a fabulously bright blue glowing orb that had no effect whatsoever. The glowing ball of light sailed steadily through the air, and out the window.

Kreas began to laugh hysterically, cackling and howling. The weight he had on Drake lessened slightly, and Drake used this opportunity to free himself. He grabbed a shard of glass from the broken table that lay beside him, holding it tight and ignoring the pain as its sharp sides cut his palm. Slashing wildly at the air above him he cut Kreas at the throat, sending the beast rearing up in pain and shock as blood spilled to the carpet. Caught by surprise it retreated, Drake now able rose to his feet, holding the shard before him like a weapon. Blood dripped to the floor from between his fingers. But he paid this no heed.

'You will pay for that' Li growled as Kreas, surprisingly silent curled up into a ball, nursing his wound carefully and trying to stem the flow of blood. 'You will die now' Li threatened. 'All of you.'

Lucas made a sudden move, flicking back his jacket and plucking from the waist of his jeans a miniature round device, small enough to hold in your fingertips. Li tried to stop him, but her snapping jaws just missed

his arm by centimetres. The device struck the floor and exploded in a cloud of thick purple smoke.

Lucas darted past the beast Li, coughing and spluttering, and into the living room where the others were, grabbing just before he left the kitchen the first and only weapon that came to hand.

'Ebony!'

He struggled to fight through the smoke, trying to find her, swiping at the air and stumbling.

'Ebony!'

'I'm here!'

Something grabbed him, something with claws. Lucas instinctively struck out with his weapon and stabbed. It let go of him, hissing like steam coming out of a vent.

'Lucas!'

'Ebony?'

He turned, seeing her there before him.

Drake was on his knees now; he lifted his head, hearing the sound of breaking glass.

Lucas put his arm firmly round Ebony and leapt through the window.

'Quickly!' Li called to her companion Kreas. 'They're escaping!'

The smoke was still thick, though it was dissipating now. Kreas scanned the room, one claw hovering over his left shoulder, over the wound. The brother Reuben still remained in the kitchen, Jacob stood away from the creatures near the corner of the living room, and Lauralie remained frozen where she had been. But two of them where gone. The strongest one and the girl in black.

'They're escaping!' Li howled. 'Hurry Kreas!'

One after the other, the creatures crawled through the broken window after them.

The next Reuben looked up; the smoke was almost all gone, along with the two creatures, Ebony, and his brother.

The aberrant guardian tilted his head to the sky, unfurling his wings at the sound of the cry of the beasts.

It's them!' the red haired guardian Indigo cried. He braced himself. 'Those monsters are after her!'

Shire swung her head round, her blue hair swishing.

'Go!' she called to the aberrant.

Culture took off in a flurry, tearing through the sky as fast as his wings could carry him. The sudden wind created from the downwards thrust of his wings drew the attention of the people in the streets, who wondered where the unexpected gust had come from. Many looked towards the guardians, but they did not see them.

'Where are they Siren?' the Indigo snarled through gritted teeth.

Siren consulted the orb.

'I see it clear…he has her…'

'What?' he rounded on her. 'He's found it before us?'

'No' Siren shook her head, 'it's not them, not the ones we know…it's another.'

'Who is it child?' her mother Shire asked tenderly.

Siren narrowed her eyes ever so slightly, looking down into the swirling light coming from the orb.

Shire placed a hand upon her daughters shoulder.

'Darling girl' Shire told her. 'We cannot waist time.'

'She's in safe hands' Siren reassured. 'Not with the enemy. She goes with Lucas willingly; they are fleeing together the beasts that hunt them.'

'Lucas?' Indigo repeated. 'We must catch them up. We must find her before *they* do.'

'Where are they Siren?' Shire asked.

She pointed.

'Nearby; in *that* direction.'

The next few minutes for Ebony were a blur. The wind was strong, and the ground beneath her moved quickly by, at a distance she dared not look to guess.

But soon the change in the wind and the sudden tightness in her stomach told her that she was descending. Her feet touched the ground, and steadying herself, she opened her eyes.

'What happened?' she asked, looking around blearily.

'I don't know' Lucas replied, letting her go. 'I don't know what those things were. I just knew we had to get away.'

'But what about the others?' Ebony voiced. 'What about your brother?'

'My brother can take care of himself, as for the others…well' he shrugged. 'The creatures were only after you…or so they said.' He fell into a silent worry, frowning to himself.

'You're right, they only want me' Ebony reassured him. 'They wouldn't have hurt the others. They have no reason to.'

'Why *are* they after you?' Lucas asked her. 'Whatever the reason they seem hell bent on it.'

'Well' Ebony spoke slowly, almost teasingly as she gazed past him. 'I suppose we both have secrets we've kept back.'

She turned and walked away from him. Lucas followed.

The tall grass of the field in which they stood swayed and danced as they moved through. A narrow picket fence with a single line of barbed wire ran along to the side of them, sections of the fence were broken and toppled over. What lay beyond was unremarkable, but within the field itself, grew a variety of wild flowers, making the field speckled with colour in the blanket of green.

'Your belt' Ebony said to Lucas who walked beside her. 'What are those devices that you carry?'

Lucas automatically and unconsciously tried to hide them from view.

'They're nothing' he mumbled.

'It was like a smoke-bomb, you used it to help us escape.'

Lucas reluctantly took one of the remaining two from his belt and showed it to her.

It was a curious looking device made of what looked like scrap metal, shaped like a piece of paper that had curled and scrunched up as it blackened in a fire.

'What is it?' Ebony said as she looked down at it.

'Just small things I've been working on' Lucas replied advertently. 'Like a project.' He shrugged. 'You know.'

He tucked it away again.

'Where are we?' Ebony asked, taking in the ambience of the meadow around them.

'We're just outside the town' Lucas replied looking over his shoulder at the buildings nearby. 'I thought it was safer here.'

'I didn't realise we were still so close to home' Ebony mumbled. 'I thought you had taken me far away.' She smiled then, taking a deep breath and stretching her arms high towards the sky. She sighed happily, allowing her body to relax again. 'It feels like we're in the countryside' Ebony beamed. 'It's really beautiful here.'

'I know' Lucas smiled with her. 'My brother and I used to play here when we were younger.'

'In this field?'

'Over the hill' he pointed. 'Just on the other side is a park.'

'It's abandoned?'

'It has been for a while, a bigger one was built within the town itself…and this one was forgotten….'

'I love parks' Ebony said beaming and holding her hands to her chest.

She rushed past him joyfully, brushing the top of the tall grass with open hands as she went, completely unperturbed by the recent series of events.

'Wait!' Lucas called after her.

She paused, glancing back at him.

'What is it?'

'Those things' Lucas began. 'They were after you.'

Ebony's shoulders sank.

'Do we have to talk about this?' she huffed.

'This is what you've been afraid of isn't it? The whole time you knew they were after you.'

Ebony turned back to face him, resigned.

'I've never seen them before.'

'But you know what they are' Lucas persisted.

'Sort of.'

'Sort of?' Lucas crossed his arms. 'Ebony, you need to tell me what's going on.'

'It's me they want' she admitted reluctantly.

'Do you have some sort of connection with them?'

'No, it's nothing like that.'

'Then what?'

She sighed.

'They're after my power. I have…much power.'

'Your power? Are you stronger than other guardians then?'

'Guardian?' Her brow lifted curiously. 'I'm not a guardian.'

'But you said…'

'No. I never said I was a guardian. You called me so many times, but I never said that I was.'

Lucas fell silent as he cast his mind back, thinking of all the days they had spent together, and he realised then that she was right. She had never once claimed to be a guardian.

Lucas raised his head.

'What are you then' he asked her, 'if not a guardian?'

Ebony hunched her body. Her head was bowed avoiding his gaze. She looked for a moment towards the direction of the park, seemingly wishing to be there.

She straightened up then, facing Lucas with confidence, now she answered.

'I'm a philosopher's stone.'

The flat was found easily enough; the aberrant guardian had sensed the direction of the conflict from far away, feeling the magic still in the atmosphere. Now it stood out like a shining beacon to him, though the energy was fading fast.

He soared through the air alongside the block of flats. Seeing a broken window pass by him, he turned in the air, changing course and heading back towards it.

'Lauralie?'

Jacob pushed aside part of the broken table. The shards of wood and glass were everywhere. Reuben moved gingerly, observing the scene of carnage that was the living room. What seemed like mere seconds ago, everything was neat and the atmosphere relaxed and conversational. Now it was all destroyed.

Lauralie sat leaning towards one side of the sofa, now just a curled up shivering ball. Her hands were over her mouth, her knees up, she was shaking and her eyes were wide and unblinking.

'Oh no' Reuben sighed wearily, walking over to her.

Jacob was already sitting by her, his hand hovering over her shoulder, almost as if too cautious to touch her, almost as if he thought she might break if he did.

'What's happened?' Drake whispered, as Reuben bent forwards to get a better look at her, brushing her hair back from her face.

'She's in shock.'

Drake, Reuben and Jacob spun round at the unfamiliar voice. Jacob gasped, drawing back in fear.

'Aberrant!' was his first instinct.

'Aberrant indeed' the guardian purred.

He had been sitting just outside the broken window, holding onto the sill with apparent ease. Now he crawled into the room through the window, straightening up and surveying casually the mess and distress left by the creatures. He had been so silent; none within the room had heard him coming.

'It's you!' Reuben stated.

'What?' Jacob exclaimed. 'You *know* this thing?'

The winged guardian took a deep and patient breath. Reuben gave a glance to Jacob, and saw he was almost as tense as Lauralie now.

'Hey!' he clicked his finger before Jacob's face. 'Snap out of it! You need to keep it together.'

'Sorry' Jacob blinked, shaking himself. 'I just…I'm fine.'

'Where is your brother?' the elder guardian named Culture demanded.

'I don't know; he just left.' Reuben indicated the window. 'With Ebony.'

'Ebony?' the black guardian frowned. 'Is this a person?'

'She's a girl' Drake told him.

'Then it must be her' the aberrant guardian mused to himself, seeming to forget for a moment that the others in the room existed. 'Do you know where they went?'

'No' Reuben told him flatly.

'Do you know this girl well?' Culture continued.

'No.'

'Then she hasn't told you?'

'Told me what? You're not making sense.' Reuben felt a flicker of anger; it was like listening to someone who was talking in riddles. He forced himself to calm, and decided to take a difference approach.

'You never told us your name.'

'Culture.'

'Culture?' Reuben scoffed. 'That's a weird name.'

Drake gave a sceptical look, but said nothing.

The aberrant looked over Lauralie briefly; it seemed as if she hadn't noticed the aberrant at all.

'So….' Culture went on. 'Which one of you has used magic?'

'Magic?' Jacob gasped. 'How did you know?'

Culture approached Lauralie, placing a hand upon her head as he surveyed her closely.

'I've been a guardian for many years' he said. 'I'm not a fool.'

'A philosopher's stone?' Lucas repeated flatly. 'What on earth is that?'

'A philosophers stone is an alchemical substance, it's said to be capable of turning metals into gold or silver' Ebony explained. 'It can cure any illness, and prolong life, as well as bringing back life.'

'And who can bring back life?' Lucas laughed sceptically. 'I doubt even a god can do that.'

'I can.'

'Have you done it before?'

'No.'

'Then how do you know it's possible?'

She lifted her eyes to him, dark and mysterious they were, as if holding some deeper meaning that Lucas could not understand.

'I just know.' She crossed her arms. 'Tell me, would such beings be hunting me if it were otherwise? To everyone else, I look just like a normal girl. I even fooled you. But to elder guardians, those that are experienced…some of them can sense us.'

'You mean there's more than one?'

'Oh yes. In fact, I think there's another one now' she said turning away.

Lucas blinked uncertainly. 'What? Another one? Where?'

'The park is just over the hill you say.'

'Yeah?'

'Come on' Ebony beckoned jovially. 'Let's say hello to her.'

'Hey wait!'

Lucas ran after her, sprinting to catch up as they headed towards the lip of the hill. Ebony pulled back as

they reached the top, Lucas caught her up, panting slightly.

They saw the rolling fields before them stretch into large sections of woodland, and beyond that, another town, though this one was dark and dreary as it sat in the distance.

Within the field before them they saw was the park, a children's playground. There was a rusty climbing frame, a slide, a see-saw, and a roundabout painted in bright colours that were now faded and chipped. The metal beneath was dark and rusted. And where the wood-chippings had been, was overgrown. Now there was grass here, tall and flourishing, like the rest of the meadow, and on a swing in the centre of the playground, rocking gently back and forth, was a girl.

She wore a simple white dress that reached down to her ankles. It was elegant and shapely, matching her long pure white hair that fell freely about her shoulders, lifting in the air as she swung back and forth on the swing. She was young, not quite twenty in age, though she looked older than Ebony. She was beautiful, and slim. She had a natural look about her, and a fine unexaggerated feminine figure.

Her voice as she sang sailed through the air towards Ebony and Lucas. And for a moment they stopped and listened.

'Angels forgiven, rise, triumphant
Gleaming and pure, were greeted
Back were the people, rejoiced, from sorrow
Demons now gone, defeated…'

'What's she doing?' Lucas asked.

'She's singing.'

The strange girl fell into silence.

'Come on' Ebony whispered, 'let's go down to see her.'

Ebony led the way as they headed down the hill, Lucas followed at a few steps behind.

The girl looked towards them as they drew closer, looking not in the least bit surprised to see either of them. It was as she had been expecting them.

The girl dragged her feet on the ground, bringing the swing to a stop.

Ebony halted a short distance from her, smiling shyly. Behind her Lucas remained, feeling suddenly like he should be giving the two girls space, feeling that there was more to this than he really understood. He thought it was wise to keep silent, and hung back to watch.

'That was a beautiful song' Ebony began. 'What's it about?'

The girl in white stared at Ebony for a moment with steely grey eyes, and then she smiled.

'It's a story, of a time where angels and demons lived together, in a world that's long been forgotten.' Her voice was soft and lyrical as she spoke, a soothing and beautiful melody, like her singing. 'The demons were blinded by heavens light, and the angels could not see in the darkness the demons brought with them.' She smiled then. 'The demons were mischievous, and the two creatures, so different from the other, found that they could not live together. The angels chased the demons away, the demons, being lazy, had not cared for

their weapons, they became rusted and old. The demons could not fight back, and so, were driven from the heaven the angels called home. The angels rose triumphantly, and were greeted by the people, bringing them out of the darkness the demons had brought onto them. And so, the demons returned to their home in darkness.'

'Did that really happen?' Ebony asked in awe.

'No' the white girl smiled. 'It's just a story.' She rose from the swing. 'It's just a song.'

'My name is Ebony.'

'Yes' the girl spoke, as if she already knew. 'I have felt your presence here for a while now. I was wondering when I would meet you. Another philosopher's stone.' She bowed her head to Ebony in a gesture of respect. 'My name is Crystal.'

'That's a nice name' Ebony sighed.

'So is yours' Crystal replied. 'And I see you've brought a guardian with you' she said looking to Lucas, acknowledging him at last. 'I hope he's not here to hurt us.'

'He's not' Ebony said hastily. 'In fact he's been protecting me.'

'How very noble of you' Crystal spoke to him. She looked away before Lucas had a chance to answer, speaking now to Ebony again. 'But I'm afraid it's too late.'

'Too late?' Ebony repeated looking worried now. 'What do you mean?'

'We are trapped here, can you not sense it?'

Ebony glanced to the meadow around them, stiffening as she suddenly noticed something she had not noticed before.

'You sense it don't you' Crystal said to her. 'There is a net, surrounding this whole town. It was placed there just for us.'

'I don't understand' Ebony begged. 'What is happening?'

A sad look crossed Crystal's expression, and she half turned from them, avoiding their gaze.

'I suppose it's my fault. It was me they were after in the first place, and I've lingered here for too long because I wanted to see you. I have allowed both of us be become trapped.' She sighed. 'But perhaps it's for the best to be caged here. I am so tired of running after all.' She turned back to Ebony. 'You must have run into at least one of them by now…the ones who hunt us I mean. There are two groups searching.'

'I have' Ebony breathed. 'They want to hurt me.'

'I know, but I am the one they were originally hunting. I am the one who draws their attention most. I am older…my powers…stronger.' She lifted her arms and indicated the meadow around her, drawing attention to something Ebony had not yet noticed.

Aberrants. They surrounded the three of them, hiding in the tall grass, peacefully they watched. Ebony saw even larger ones at a distance, some colossal, sitting on the horizon. It was almost as if they were watching over Crystal, like loving parents.

'They are drawn to our powers, more so now that we are together.' Crystal lowered her arms smiling.

'They are thought so often to be evil and dark and sinister, but I find otherwise.'

One of the aberrants approached her, crouching close to the ground in submission. Crystal knelt down to touch it.

It was a small and scrawny looking thing, with sharp spikes protruding from its shoulders and upwards pointing horns protruding from both the heads of the aberrant. It had been hiding in the tall grass, completely concealed from view.

Crystal touched their heads, loving them and petting them like one would do to a domestic dog. The aberrant chattered as if in happiness, flicking its long tail and closing its eyes contentedly. It accepted her touch graciously. Crystal chuckled lightly with joy, straightening up again. The two heads of the aberrant bared their teeth, but it did not look to be aggressive, it looked as if they were smiling at her. The aberrant backed away, retreating to the tall grass. It lay down again in hiding, becoming near enough invisible.

'That is why I've been seeing more aberrants lately' Lucas spoke up. 'It's because they were following you' he said to Ebony, 'and you' he said to Crystal.

Ebony gave him a nod. 'They've been following me all my life' she explained. 'I can keep them away most of the time, but they've never been far from my side.'

There was an insect that appeared at that moment, a dragonfly. It had emerald faceted eyes and a mechanical body made of many different parts, like that of a ticking clock. Its wings were clear, like glass.

It flitted in the air, darting wildly in different directions just as typical dragons do. Ebony sensed a

sort of high intelligence about it, almost to a human level.

Crystal held out her palm, and the insect landed there lightly. It was quite large in size, larger than was natural, and on closer inspection it was clear to see that it was indeed made of metal.

'This is my friend' Crystal explained. 'His name is Cid. He keeps me company. He is like a familiar to me.'

A thought struck Ebony suddenly, and faded as fast as it had come.

No she thought, remembering Pokie sadly. *He's gone now*.

'He only lives, because of my magic that keeps him alive' Crystal went on, speaking about the mechanical dragonfly. 'If I were to die, then so would he.'

The dragonfly darted off again, as if sensing her dark thoughts. It was gone in an instant to who knew where, quickly vanishing from sight.

'Cid has been my friend for a long time' Crystal went on, 'he keeps a look out for me.'

She gasped suddenly, eyes darting over their heads and towards the direction of the town. Becoming suddenly tense and without explanation, she turn-tailed and ran, her movement smooth and graceful. Her long white hair swished and her long white dress trailing after her as she ran. She disappeared in the trees of the forest nearby.

'Where is she going?' Lucas spoke up.

'She's hiding' Ebony replied.

'From what?'

'I don't know.'

It was then Ebony noticed that the aberrants were gone too. Slinking away in the tall grass or fleeing into the trees as Crystal had. Even the larger ones on the horizon had vanished.

Lucas glanced around nervously, perhaps at the feeling of being suddenly so alone, and the fear of whatever was coming.

'You say you have strong powers?' Lucas began, still looking cautiously about them.

'Yes' Ebony replied.

'Then how come you've never used them before? And why don't you try to protect yourself? Why didn't you keep back those creatures that attacked us?'

'Because I can only use my own magic in very small doses, my true power lies inside' she said touching her heart. 'In a place I cannot reach.'

'What good is that?'

'Very little it seems' Ebony admitted. 'I envy other guardians sometimes. I mean…what use is it to have this magic if you cannot even use it?'

'How do you know you even *have* this magic?'

'Instinct' Ebony replied. 'I can feel it inside me. I know what I am. The fact that aberrants follow me is proof enough.'

Lucas looked past her and towards the forest Crystal was now hiding in.

'If you have all this magic then how do you use it?'

'*I* can't' Ebony told him. 'My magic can only be obtained by another, after I die.'

'What?'

'If I am killed, the philosophers stone that is hidden inside me appears…no…it's like my very flesh is made from this property. It becomes this stone.'

'Then how do you know this?' Lucas asked curiously, 'if you have never died?'

Ebony turned away from him. 'Because my sister, my dear sister I watched die in the hands of guardians that hunted her. They hunted her with the same intent as those that hunt me now.' Ebony cast her mind back, regret and sorrow filled her heart. 'Her body vanished' she spoke quietly, 'leaving behind a stone. I remember seeing it, it was bright pink.' She lifted a hand to her face, touching a finger to her eye. 'My foster parents always wanted me to hide this, back in the day before I became unseen to them.' Ebony removed the contact lenses from her eyes, flicking them away, lost forever in the tall grass. 'I suppose there is no point in hiding them now.' She turned.

Lucas gasped at the sight of her, taking a small step back. Her eyes now were an unnatural bright pink shade.

'Philosophers stones all have eyes like these' Ebony indicated. 'My sister had eyes like these, it's one of the reasons she was so easily caught. Since then, I've hidden them from the world.'

Lucas was speechless, as the information slowly began to sink in.

'More guardians try to hunt my kind than those that try to protect. It's the power we hold that they seek.'

'I have no desire for such power' Lucas whispered.

'Then you are one of the few' Ebony replied sadly.

'So you've been hiding all this time?'

'Yes' she smiled sadly, 'but now, because of you, I'm slowly learning that the world is not such a cruel place after all. There *are* good people in it.'

Three figures materialised into the scene at that point, as if in answer to her words. They surrounded Ebony and Lucas, like three points of a triangle. Ebony glanced around at them, instinctively she moved closer to Lucas who braced himself, thinking immediately dark thoughts of attack.

One of the three, a younger girl with long blue wavy hair, held a sort of orb in her hands.

'It's her' she said simply.

Lucas placed a hand on Ebony's arm, pulling her closer to him.

The other female, a woman also with blue hair broke her formation. Shire moved to stand with her daughter Siren, as if to show that they meant no harm. Lucas saw a potential escape route, though didn't move. Not just yet.

'What about this one?' Indigo asked Siren, glancing at Lucas.

He had light skin and pea-green eyes, with black rooted fiery red hair spiked backwards. He had two lines of black tattoos, each running from below his eyes, down his cheeks and down his neck and chest. He wore a hoodless black cloak covered in chains and links. He had the stance and demeanour of a born leader.

'These are the ones I've been seeing' the young guardian named Siren told him, clutching the orb she carried in both hands. 'After all this time' she said, 'they are finally found.'

Indigo flicked a section of his red hair back, placing his hands on his hips and swaying casually on the spot.

'Tell me kids, what are your names?'

Lucas didn't answer; he just glared suspiciously, resenting being referred to as a juvenile.

'Ok, then tell me this' the Indigo said, speaking directly to Lucas now. 'Why are you sharing company with a philosopher's stone?'

'Wait' Siren interrupted. She consulted the orb. 'The other one is nearby.'

'What?'

Indigo rounded on her. 'Are you sure?'

'Positive' Siren replied.

'Well…' Indigo mumbled to himself. 'This certainly is interesting….Stop!'

Lucas had grabbed Ebony by the wrist and yanked her with him as he ran; breaking for the gap Shire had left. But Shire was there in an instant to stop them; blocking their path she materialized herself before their very eyes by magic.

Lucas backed away from her, pulling Ebony with him.

They were trapped, with no hope of outrunning three elder guardians. They were at their mercy.

The trail the philosophers stone had left had been hard to find, and even harder to follow, but the beasts had found it eventually. Li held back, lips curling in a silent growl of frustration. Li saw her target, the

philosophers stone dressed in black, with the young male who protected her, Lucas. Inexperienced as he was, it was easy pickings. She was about to approach, when others suddenly appeared, materializing around the younger ones, transported by their magic. Three other guardians, elder ones, the ones they had been fighting.

They were outnumbered.

'They got there first' she tensed, 'so sly, they got here before we did.'

'Aaarrrggg.'

Li turned back to Kreas.

'What the hell is wrong with you?'

Kreas caressed his arm tenderly; still sticking out of his left shoulder was a handle. In their haste to chase after their prey, he had not had time nor chance to remove it yet.

'He stabbed me with a potato peeler' Kreas hissed. 'That young guardian…*dam him*.'

'Stop your whining.'

Li slunk back from the top of the hill; she had been crouching, hiding there in the long grass. Out of sight now of the others she stood tall again, joining Kreas as he pawed at the thing stuck in his shoulder. Li grabbed the handle with her teeth, jerking it backward sharply and throwing it away. Kreas recoiled as she did this, but did not make a sound. He turned his head to lick the wound, cleaning the blood away.

'Come on' Li said. 'We'd better tell our master.'

'What news we have' Kreas cackled straightening.

'Indeed' she agreed. 'She has been found, but not the one we were originally looking for.'

'Two philosopher's stones!' Kreas sniggered cruelly. 'What fun…what *power*.'

'Our master is far now and travelling fast. We must be swift to catch him. Can you run Kreas?'

'I can run faster than you can' he sneered. He had finished cleaning the injury.

'Then let us not argue about it then.'

They left the scene, heading back swiftly towards the centre of town to find their master.

'Do not be afraid' the red haired guardian said, 'my name is Indigo. And we pose no harm.'

'What do you want with her?' Lucas demanded.

'To protect her.'

'You're lying.'

'We're telling the truth' Indigo persisted. 'If we had wanted to harm her, I would not waste my breath on explanations.'

'I think he's telling the truth' Ebony muttered into Lucas' ear. 'I told you didn't I? I told you there are those who wish to protect me.'

'Tell me child' Indigo continued speaking to Ebony, 'what is your name?'

'Ebony.'

'And what a beautiful name it is too.' He put a hand to his chest. 'I am Indigo, and these are Shire and Siren' he indicated the elder guardians that stood nearby. 'They are mother and daughter.'

Shire smiled back at Ebony and Lucas. Siren remained impassive.

'They do look very similar don't they?' Ebony said offhandedly, still sticking close to Lucas. 'Except the eyes' she said to them. 'You have very different eyes.'

Shire's were burnished gold and yellow. Siren's were light and misty blue.

'Tell me' Indigo asked Ebony. 'Have you run into other beings. Those that hunt you?'

'Yes' Ebony answered. 'Two creatures, one black and smaller, and the other tall and dog-like.'

'It's them' Shire curled her lip in disgust.

'It looks like you've gotten yourself into a bit of a scrap.' Indigo said to Lucas, indicating his torn clothes and the scratches and nicks over his body. 'And what's this?' he asked, glancing to Lucas' back, where there were the two vertical slits torn in his shirt, side by side and perfectly straight.

'It's nothing' Lucas grumbled, avoiding the subject.

'Don't worry' Indigo said getting back on topic. 'You're safe with us now, they won't attack if they're outnumbered.'

'How do you know this about them?' Lucas asked suspiciously.

'Because we've fought them before' Indigo replied. 'Where was it you met them?'

'At my home.'

'Your home?' Indigo was suddenly alarmed. 'What about your family? Are they safe?'

'I don't know, my brother was there, and three of our friends.'

Indigo nodded. 'Shire will see to them, just tell us where you live.'

Lucas gave the address, explaining briefly how to find the place, and Shire bowed her head respectively.

'I will see that they are well' she spoke politely.

'Thank you Shire' Indigo said eagerly. 'Now go.'

Shire turned on the spot and strode away; she vanished into thin air, fading before their very eyes.

'Aren't we going back to see if they're ok?' Lucas asked.

'In time' Indigo replied. 'First, I want to find out more about this fascinating creature' he said looking at Ebony. 'Tell me' Indigo went on, distracting himself momentarily and speaking now with some level of amusement to Lucas. 'How did one such as yourself become so close to a philosopher's stone? I hear they are very shy by nature, and suspicious of most people.'

Reuben stood by the broken window gazing outwards, shoulders slumped.

Lucas, my brother…where are you now?

Behind him the aberrant Culture still observed Lauralie, kneeling before her and muttering inaudibly under his breath. Drake sat quietly beside them on the sofa, Jacob on her other side was standing. They both watched Lauralie sadly.

'Is there anything you can do for her?' Jacob asked. 'Will she be ok?'

'Not if she doesn't receive help' the aberrant replied. He stretched his wings, Jacob stepped back as one drew closer to him.

'What kind of help?' Drake asked.

'The kind of help only a guardian can offer' the aberrant replied. 'Magic has done this to her, and only magic can save her.'

Another figure materialized suddenly into the room without warning. All eyes turned to her, Drake slowly straightened up at the sight of the blue haired woman. She was tall, with very pale skin and burnished gold eyes.

Reuben turned at the sound of the magic as she appeared, he moved away from the window, giving the strange woman a sceptical look.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'Shire' the blue haired guardian replied shortly without looking at him.

Her attention shifted to Lauralie, who was still stiff and pale where she sat. Her eyes were glazed over, and she appeared to be completely unaware of her surroundings or anyone in the room.

'What is the girl's name?' Shire asked as she approached, kneeling before her.

'It's Lauralie.' Drake said.

'Lauralie.' Shire spoke her words calm and clear. 'Lauralie. Can you hear me?'

'She's unresponsive' Culture replied.

Lauralie was sweating, her skin was clammy and her shallow breathing was rapid. Shire touched her at the neck and wrist.

'Her pulse is weak and fast' she said. 'The girl's hyperventilating; she's entered the second stage of shock.'

'Compensatory?' Culture asked.

'Yes' Shire said rising to her feet. 'If she enters the progressive stage, the damage may be irreversible.'

The aberrant grimaced suddenly, rising and turning his back on the others, clutching his chest as he moved away.

'Are you alright?' Shire worried.

Culture groaned, still holding himself. His body hunched over. 'It hurts…' he whispered. '…with every heartbeat…'

The pain seemed to subside, for the aberrant's body relaxed again, and he let out a deep breath.

'Is Lauralie going to be ok?' Jacob repeated, more urgently now. 'Can't you do something?'

'There is a way.' Shire mumbled. She spoke to Culture. 'You know what it is.'

Culture lifted his dark eyes to her. 'Are you prepared to do it?' he asked solemnly.

'She is…the one I've been waiting for' Shire glanced to Lauralie. 'Perhaps it is fate' she whispered. 'I am willing to save her' she spoke louder now to the others in the room. 'But she will not be the same if I do.'

'Do whatever you have to' Jacob urged, brushing Lauralie's auburn hair back tenderly. 'Please, just save her.'

Shire nodded. 'Don't be afraid' Shire soothed. 'Everything is going to be alright.'

'What are you going to do?' Jacob asked nervously. 'How can you save her?'

'By passing on my magic.' Shire touched Lauralie in the centre of her chest, right above her heart. 'She will be just like you.'

A white light grew, gradually engulfing the entire room and all within, before fading again completely.

Reuben blinked as his eyes adjusted to the regular light once more. The aberrant Culture rose to catch the blue haired woman as she stumbled backwards, suddenly overcome with fatigue. Culture guided her to the armchair and sat her down. She slumped, closing her eyes and resting.

'She will take some time to recover' Culture said absently.

'And Lauralie?' Jacob asked.

'…Will be alright now' Culture finished. 'Rest will return her to her usual self.'

It was true now that Lauralie was already looking better. Her breathing had returned to normal, and the colour was slowly coming back to her cheeks. She appeared now to be only sleeping.

Jacob let out a deep sigh of relief.

'You better watch your backs' Culture warned them all. 'There is still danger out there. Don't assume that this is over just yet.'

Jacob raised his hand before his face, summoning into existence a ball of light. He played with it, twirling it between his fingers with ease.

'Put your magic away' Reuben hissed. 'It's magic that did this to Lauralie.'

'It's ok' Jacob said absently. 'She is one of us now.'

Drake turned his head curiously towards him. 'Jacob?'

'Don't call me that' he said, staring at the light in his hand mesmerized. 'My name' he continued, closing his palm and cutting off the magic, 'is Venom.'

'Two philosopher's stones?' the master repeated.

Kreas tittered to himself, listening with pleasure and anticipation as the news was delivered to their master.

'Are you sure of this?' their master asked, speaking to Li.

'Positive master' the beast replied. 'I saw them with my own eyes, we both did.'

'Two of them' Kreas sniggered in agreement. 'One white and one black.'

'This is interesting.'

'Does it change anything?' Kreas asked.

'It does' the master replied coolly. 'Now we hunt two, instead of one.'

'But what about the other guardians?' Li asked her master. 'They have the black one.'

'Have they taken her to the Ancient World?' the master asked.

Li shook her head. 'I can't be sure.'

'But the white one' Kreas interjected quickly. 'She is still free.'

'Then we will find her' the master said.

'It is likely that the other guardians will remain here' Li said, 'until they have both of the philosopher's stones.'

'Then we had best be quick' the master said. 'We need to…up our game.'

'The black philosopher's stone seems to have an attachment to one of the young guardians' Li told him.

The master nodded.

'I want you to find them. Keep an eye on them, and strike when you have the chance. Strike when the

elder guardians drop their guard. I want you to get the black philosophers stone back.'

'We will watch the young guardians' Kreas hissed. 'We will not fail.'

'Be sure that you don't' the master warned. 'Do what needs to be done. Whatever the cost. We cannot fail Lagoon. He would not be pleased.'

The small group walked slowly through the tall grass of the meadow, moving gradually away from the town in no particular direction. The area grew more open the further away they walked, and they passed easily over the broken picket fences and the strands of barbed wire that curled and twisted in the grass.

'So tell us more about this second philosopher's stone' Indigo said, after hearing the story Lucas had told about how he and Ebony had first met.

'I already told you' Ebony sighed. 'We only talked to her briefly, she ran off just before you guys arrived. She seemed very frightened when she realised you were about to turn up.'

'She knew we were coming before we arrived?' Indigo asked.

'She did' Ebony replied, glancing sideways at him.

Indigo pondered at this, humming thoughtfully to himself. 'She must be a sharp one in that case. No wonder it's been so hard to find her.'

'Anyway' Ebony continued. 'Wouldn't *I* be the second philosopher's stone if she was the one you were originally looking for?'

'I suppose' Indigo smiled. 'She has been eluding us for a while now. You on the other hand seemed to come from nowhere.' He paused. 'It's so unusual to find two together, such rare creatures that you are.'

Lucas and Ebony led the way with Indigo walking slightly behind, Siren followed after them several steps after, still clutching her orb firmly in her hands.

'Did you see which way this other philosopher's stone went?' Indigo asked, trying his best to sound casual.

Lucas glared suspiciously at him at this.

'Oh…I don't know' Ebony shrugged distractedly.

'*Pleeeze'* Indigo whined. 'This is *reeelly* important.'

'Why?' Ebony demanded turning on him. 'What do you want from her?'

'She needs to be protected' Indigo replied.

'I don't think she needs your protection' Ebony told him, 'nor would she want it. I think perhaps she just wants to be left alone.'

'Why, do you know her?' Indigo asked slyly.

'No.'

'Then how do you know what she would want?'

Ebony crossed her arms stubbornly. 'Because I feel the same' she said.

Indigo scowled at her. 'If her power gets into the wrong hands…'

'What are you planning to do with her if you find her?' Ebony asked him. 'And now that you've found me, what do you plan to do?'

'You need to be taken to the Ancient World' Indigo replied. 'You would be safer there.'

'I am just as safe here as I would be there' Ebony argued.

'No, you'd be amongst friends there.'

'Friends?' Ebony stopped and looked to the sky, seeing a flock of geese flying in formation overhead. 'I have never known what's it's like not to be alone.'

The others paused then.

'You will be safer in the Ancient World' Indigo persisted. 'There are more guardians, there is more magic. You would be protected there, understood.'

'In a world where there are more guardians who want to hurt me,' Ebony sighed. She continued walking, the others followed suit. Lucas beside her was completely silent now, and Siren continued to stare into her orb as she trailed after them.

'At least in this world fewer people know about me' Ebony went on.

'We can't leave this kind of power simply *wandering* around' Indigo went on. 'Do you have any idea of the consequences if you were found by the wrong people?'

An image flashed in Ebony's mind then of a girl she once knew and loved. Her sister, screaming for Ebony to run, before she was slaughtered so violently before her very eyes.

'……Yes' Ebony murmured, slowing to a stop again. 'I do.'

Indigo hesitated. 'Then I suppose you'd know in that case how important it is that we return both of you to the Ancient World where you *belong*.'

'I belong here' Ebony replied dreamily, as if she were only half-listening.

'Where is she?' Indigo demanded, his tone losing patience now.

'You won't find her' Ebony said simply. 'If she's managed to hide from you all this time then you will struggle to find her now. She's older than I am, and so much more experienced.'

'You *will* tell me.'

'I won't' Ebony droned, turning away and crossing her arms, an action that seemed to infuriate him even more.

'You will not play this game with me' Indigo began, raising his voice and taking a step towards her.

In an instant Lucas put himself between them, shoving Indigo in the chest and pushing him back.

'Stay away' he ordered, nearly shouting.

'Indigo' Siren barked suddenly, speaking up for the first time as Indigo made a move to step forwards. 'You will not frighten her; she is scared enough as it is.'

Indigo glared at all of them, shaking his head in exasperation.

'Foolish children' he huffed storming away, though he didn't go far.

'I'm sorry Ebony' Siren told her in a soothing voice. 'We truly mean you no harm. But we have been searching and travelling for so long, we are all tired and weary.'

Ebony smiled at her. There was something about this girl that calmed her, that made her feel at ease.

Siren beamed back, consulting her orb again. Within it she saw a handsome character dressed in leather, his black hair spiked forwards.

'Do you know someone called Venom?' she asked suddenly, speaking to Lucas.

'Venom?' he hesitated.

'Jacob?' Siren offered.

'Is he ok?' Lucas asked her nervously.

'Don't worry' Siren reassured him. 'He is well. I can see him now.'

'What about my brother?'

'Hmm' Siren hummed. 'What does he look like?'

'So are we just going to sit here like this and do nothing?' Venom argued to Reuben.

'It's not safe to leave.'

'It's not safe to stay.'

Reuben glared at him. 'You think I don't want to try to find my brother? I wouldn't even know where to begin.'

They were still in the flat, and Reuben lost for anything else to do had tried to tidy the place as best he could, just to keep his mind occupied. When he had finished, he grew quickly bored, and restless. He stood by the broken window now, staring out in case he saw his brother. He swallowed the lump in his throat.

'The creatures won't come back here' Culture said off handed. 'It's the girl in black that they seek.'

Venom sighed and covered his face with a hand. 'How do we know Lucas and Ebony are not in danger?'

'Indigo is likely to be with them by now' Culture replied. 'So is Siren.'

'They are your friends I assume?' Venom asked turning to him.

'I would try to find them myself' Culture spoke up, 'but I'm not feeling well.' He unconsciously touched his chest as he said this. 'And besides' he continued, 'I don't want to leave Shire alone.'

'Jeez, I only came here to meet Ebony' Venom huffed.

Reuben brushed the curtain back slightly.

'It's getting dark outside.'

He moved away and sat in one of the cushioned seats.

Several minutes of silence passed, and Reuben's mind began to wander as he stared blankly at the wall.

White…hmm, not a bad colour……I suppose you can mix white with any colour in a room….easy to get dirty though, I guess that's why doctors wear it, do nurses wear white? My dentist does…

'Hey!' Venom shouted. 'I'm talking to you, are you listening to me?'

'Be quiet' Reuben hissed. 'You'll wake them up' he said indicating Shire and Lauralie.

'We should go out and look for them' Venom said. 'We should do that at least.'

'Look for them where?' Reuben laughed flatly. 'They could be anywhere; they could be one hundred miles away for all we know. This town is large enough, and besides….' Reuben added in mumble, 'I don't think Lucas wants me around right now…'

'Then what should we do?' Venom continued in a hushed voice.

'Stay here and wait' Reuben said in a tone that suggested the end of the discussion.

Venom turned away, and Reuben became quickly distracted again.

Lucas left his mobile behind…. Reuben thought seeing it on the floor. *I guess he didn't get a chance to pick it up in the rush…*

'In the meantime' Reuben continued speaking to Venom, 'why don't we watch….oh that's right we sold the TV. I wouldn't worry' Reuben waved as if this didn't matter, 'I'm sure they're both fine. Culture did say that Indigo and Siren are probably with them now…whoever they are…'

'And that's a good thing?' Venom asked, raising his eyebrow as he glanced towards Culture, who stared mutely back at him, his large leathery wings folded behind him.

Reuben turned to look at Culture also, before facing Venom again.

'Culture has been good to us' he said. 'I think we can trust his friends to be good too.'

Venom folded his arms, not entirely convinced.

'I sure hope your right' Venom sighed.

They lapsed into silence, as the minutes began to tick away.

Both the blue haired woman, and Lauralie slept heavily now, showing no signs of waking any time soon. Drake had been watching over Lauralie for the last several minutes, having not spoken for a while. No doubt his thoughts were clouded with worry.

'Are you alright?' Drake said suddenly, speaking to the aberrant.

'Hm?' Culture looked up.

'You said that your heart hurts' Drake told him.

'Yes' Culture said, avoiding his gaze then. 'It does.' He sat in one of the armchairs in the room, resting with his elbows on his knees, leaning forward to give space to his large wings.

'What's wrong?' Drake asked him.

Culture took a deep breath, answering only reluctantly after several moments.

'I am getting old' the aberrant confessed. 'My heart is failing.'

'Old?' Drake repeated. He took at every detail of the aberrant's face.

Despite the coal-black skin, the aberrant could have been called handsome. His face was slim and looked young, and his skin was utterly perfect. His appearance suggested that he was barely over twenty. And his bare chest was lean and his arms were muscular.

'I don't understand' Drake said.

'Aberrants have a far shorter lifespan than humans do' Culture droned. 'They grow fast and die young.'

'How old are you?' Drake said, 'if you don't mind me asking.'

'Twenty four.'

'Is that all?'

'Yes' the aberrant nodded glumly. 'I am nearing the end of my life. Most aberrants don't live past twenty five, and my heart has gotten worse day by day, but there is nothing to be done about it.' He sighed deeply. 'I only pray I live long enough to return to the Ancient World.'

'I assure you, all four of them are fine' Siren repeated yet again. 'I promise my powers do not lie.'

'Even my brother?' Lucas insisted. 'Is he fine too?'

'Yes' Siren chuckled in amusement. 'Even that Lauralie you love so much.'

Lucas drew back hesitantly, giving her an uncertain look.

'I'm joking' Siren laughed, touching Lucas' arm in reassurance. 'I know you find her tiresome.'

'Annoying is more the word' Lucas finished.

'Anyway' Ebony interrupted; her tone exasperated as she threw a disapproving look towards Lucas. She spoke to Siren. 'Tell me about the Ancient World.'

Siren gleamed kindly. 'If you do come with us to the Ancient World, I want you to come through your own choice.'

She knelt, sitting in the grass that now reached her eyelevel.

'Please, sit with me.'

She placed the orb in her lap as Lucas and Ebony sat, facing each other they formed a triangle. Hidden by the tall grass, only the tops of their heads could be seen. Ebony noticed briefly the figure of Indigo, facing them a short distance away. He was leaning back against one of the old posts that made up the broken fence, arms crossed and looking glum.

'The Ancient World' Siren began, 'is a wonderful place. There are no huge cities made of metal, no cars or pollution. Their cities are made of stone, and are utterly outstanding. The land in the Ancient World is by far more open, and more land is given to the wildlife, you can travel for miles in one direction and

see nothing but wilderness. If you go in another direction, you will see the most fabulous towns.' Siren paused for a moment, gazing down at her orb. She lifted her head and continued. 'The city, the capital, is built of faded grey stone, with narrow streets and lines of houses as far as you could walk. It is built near the coastline, and the palace at its centre is the grandest building that I have ever seen.'

'I knew there were other worlds out there' Lucas said triumphantly. 'My brother thought the same.'

'Well you were right' Siren agreed. 'Both of you.'

'How many worlds are there?' Lucas asked.

'That we know of? Three. This world, the Ancient World, and the Aberrant World.'

'Aberrant World?' Ebony echoed.

'It is a cold world' Siren explained, 'and desolate, or so it first appears. All aberrants originally come from that world.'

'Then how do they appear in this world?' Ebony asked Siren.

'There are some aberrants that can use magic' Siren told her. 'Like Culture.'

'Who's that?' Lucas raised an eyebrow at the name.

'The winged guardian you found in the skate park' Siren said to Lucas. 'He told us all about that. He originally came from the Aberrant World. Many aberrants who can wield magic leave portals open for other aberrant who cannot.'

'Portals?' Lucas leant forwards eagerly.

'It's how guardians travel from one world to another' Siren told him. 'It seems you still have a lot to learn.'

'Where are these portals?' Lucas asked Siren.

The portals are in fixed places, so you have to find them before you can open them, that can sometimes be tricky. Only those that can wield magic can open a portal to another world.'

'So *I* could open a portal?' Lucas asked excitedly.

Siren mused. 'Perhaps, you are still young as a guardian, and I don't know much of your powers or abilities, but it is more than likely.'

Lucas nodded as her words sunk it, trying hard to suppress his excitement.

'I have a question' Ebony asked Siren' How is it that people without magic cannot see us?'

'Magic is a strange thing' Siren spoke, 'and I'm afraid we don't fully understand it, even now.'

'But guardians can be seen by others who don't have magic' Ebony went on. 'Yet I cannot.'

'Is that so?'

'When I was younger, my foster parents barely noticed me. But now, they don't see me at all.'

'You've matured' Siren explained. 'You are an extremely powerful creature. You are bound to become unseen by the non-magic as you grow older. Guardians though are not as powerful. They *can* be seen by others, but not the magic that they use. If a normal person does see magic, then it drives them mad. Many believe there is a seal on this world, so magic cannot be seen.'

'I suppose that make sense' Ebony admitted. 'But why are aberrants attracted to us?'

'I don't know' Siren replied. 'I don't think anyone does. We only know that aberrants are drawn to philosopher's stones. That's why we brought Culture

along.' A smile tweaked her lips. 'You have very beautiful eyes by the way' she said to Ebony. 'They are very unusual.'

They were interrupted suddenly by Indigo. He stood over them now, arms crossed.

'We should go back to your home' Indigo said moodily to Lucas. 'We should see how your friends are doing.'

They stood in formation facing inwards. Siren cast her hand out and used her magic to transport the four of them back to Lucas' home.

When Lucas opened his eyes, blinded momentarily by the white light of the spell, he barely had time to re-orientate himself before a figure rushed to him. Reuben embraced his brother tightly, whispering words of relief and reassurance into his ear. Lucas in turn, held him back instinctively. Drake and the newly christened Venom both rose as the group materialized into the living room. Discussions began in a murmur between the elders. Shire still slept, and Culture explained to Indigo what had happened, glancing towards the young Lauralie as he did. Siren touched her mother's cheek tenderly. Worry etched in her face.

As the hours wore on, and the sky darkened to almost pitch black, Drake and Venom decided to go home.

'I can't stay here' Drake said. 'I've got to go home, I'm visiting Eleanor tomorrow, and the train leaves early.'

'Are you going to be alright?' Lucas asked the both of them.

Venom gave him a bemused look. 'I am a guardian' he said confidently. 'My powers have finally come to me.'

'You have to understand' Lucas warned him, 'that there are still dangers out there.'

'Then I can give as good as I get' Venom laughed. 'And anyway, Drake will accompany me half the way.'

'Just be careful' Lucas told them, as Ebony shyly waved them goodbye from behind Lucas.

'We will' Drake said.

'Do me a favour and text me when you both get home, just so that I know you're safe.'

The two agreed only reluctantly. They said their goodbyes and Lucas watched them as they left. Retreating back into the apartment he propped the newly fixed door back in its place. It had been badly damaged by the creatures, but the elder guardians had helped him fix it as best they could.

Inside the apartment now, the mood was subdued. Everyone was quiet, except for Culture and Ebony, who spoke eagerly together in hushed voices.

No doubt he's drawn to her like the other aberrants are Lucas thought. *Just like Siren told us.*

He received a text on his phone some minutes later from Drake and Venom, telling him they had returned home safely.

Lucas placed the mobile back in his pocket.

'It's late' he said to his brother. 'I'm going to bed.'

'What about the others?' Reuben asked, indicating the elder guardians and Lauralie.

Lucas glanced at them.

'We're staying here' Indigo clarified. 'It's comfortable, if not a little chilly.' He glanced to the broken window as he said this.

Lauralie was still fast asleep, and Siren stayed close to her mother, who still rested.

'Well I guess I can't make you leave' Lucas sighed, 'even if I could be bothered to try. I suppose Lauralie's to stay too?'

'She needs the rest' Siren voiced. 'Her body and mind have suffered a great strain.'

Lucas turned from the room, waving Siren away dismissively; too weary by the day's events to answer. He slouched down the corridor to his own bedroom, Reuben trailing after him, and Ebony following them headed to her own room once belonging to their mother. Collapsing on his bunk in the clothes he still wore, Lucas began to drift quickly off to sleep, before being abruptly woken by his mobile receiving a text.

It was from Sian.

Will I be seeing you tomorrow?

Lucas groaned in frustration, dumping the mobile off the edge of the bed and rolling over to face the wall.

He began to drift off again, until he was deep in his dreams.

Chapter Seven

Stanger in the Night

Sunday morning

Kreas and Li watched the apartment from the roof of the building nearby, now in their human forms. Side by side they waited, silently observing the elder guardians, and the younger guardians through the broken window. But the philosopher's stone was not in sight.

'Where is she?' Kreas demanded, balling his fists. 'I don't see her.'

'She must be there' Li replied, sweeping her long blond hair back. 'The others would be out looking for her if she wasn't.'

'Perhaps she's just resting' Kreas thought aloud.

'Yes' Li replied. 'Perhaps she is.'

'She is there' came a third voice.

Kreas and Li lifted their head towards the voice. Their master approached the edge of the roof, his long white coat and long black hair lifted in the strong wind.

'Can you sense her master?' Li asked him.

The master stared forwards solemnly, his red eyes blazing.

'Yes' the master mumbled. 'I can feel her, she is breathing slowly; deeply…I believe she is sleeping.'

'What should we do?' Kreas asked him. 'The other guardians are sure to take her to the Ancient World soon.'

'I'm not so sure' the master replied, receiving curious looks from Kreas and Li at these words.

'If they have not already taken her to the Ancient World' the master began moving slowly away. 'Then there is a reason for them to remain.' His hand lifted to his chin as he thought. 'Perhaps they hope to catch the other stone before they return.'

'What should we do?' Li asked.

The master glanced up. 'What do you know of her?' he asked the two behind him.

'Very little' Li told. 'She seems to have an attachment to the young guardian who protects her. Lucas I think is his name.'

'Does she have an attachment to any others?' the master questioned.

'We're not sure.'

'Perhaps we can reach some sort of agreement' the master went on. 'Let's assume she cares for these young guardians.'

Kreas gasped suddenly in realisation. His brow furrowed in a cruel gleam then. 'Very good master' he said. 'Very good indeed.'

'They are together now' the master continued. 'We cannot intrude when they are protected by the elder guardians, but…there is one of their own who travels alone.' He raised his head to the expanse of land before them. The town grew wide, and just on the horizon,

wild fields rolled onto places unseen. 'Many of the towns in this world are connected by train' the master said. 'I say we make our presence known.'

Kreas cackled hysterically as he transformed into his beastly self alongside Li. They ran to follow their master as he made his way, the three leaving the town entirely.

Ebony woke a little later in the morning, clearly exhausted by the adventures and excitement of the day before. She exited the mother's bedroom, which had now become hers, and entered the living room where the others were gathered. They were all awake now. The four elder guardians were dotted around the room. Indigo and Shire were playing chess on the floor where the coffee table had been before it was broken. Siren sat cross-legged on the sofa beside Reuben, eating her cereal noisily and reading a magazine, the orb which she always carried around now sat on the floor before her. Culture stood mutely by the window, seemingly disinterested in everything else in the room. But his eyes kept flicking back towards Ebony as she stood in the doorway, drawn to her by a love and a desire to protect. A thing he shared with all other aberrants, and something that could not be explained.

'Morning' Ebony declared.

Lauralie who was sitting on Reuben's other side looked up at the voice, turning her head and staring right at her. 'Oh' she said in surprise, clearly not expecting to see her. 'Hello, who are you?'

Ebony blinked, equally as surprised to be noticed as Lauralie was to see her. 'Hello' she fumbled over her words. 'I um…I'm Ebony.'

'Is this your *girlfriend*' Lauralie nudged Reuben teasingly beside her. 'You didn't tell me you were hiding a girl here; and one so pretty too. Oh relax' she waved at Ebony as she began to blush. 'I'm only teasing you. Reuben's explained everything.' She rose to greet her, ignoring Reuben as he glared at the back of Lauralie's head.

'Everything?' Ebony repeated hesitantly as Lauralie stood before her.

'Yes' Lauralie said, taking Ebony's hands in hers. 'Everything. I know what you are, and what I've become, and I'm sorry for ignoring you yesterday. I promise, for the life of me, that I did not see you.' Her eyes twinkled at that. 'Reuben's been trying to explain to me for the last twenty minutes what you look like. But his feeble powers of description fall utterly short. I did not realise you were so pretty.'

Ebony blushed further, looking at her feet shyly.

'I think we shall be good friends' Lauralie beamed.

'I think we shall' Ebony replied, looking up again. 'At least…I hope so…'

'Let me just say' Lauralie went on, 'that you have the most gorgeous eyes.'

'You really think so?'

'Yeah' Lauralie replied, as if it were obvious. 'I'm jealous, I *love* pink!'

Ebony's stomach began to growl then, causing Lauralie to laugh.

'We'd better go get you something to eat' she said, her laughter dying down. 'You had a very eventful day yesterday didn't you?'

Lucas was in the kitchen, speaking on his mobile to Sian in a heated tone.

'I've had enough of this' he growled. 'This is getting ridiculous.'

'You're telling me!' she cried down the phone at him. 'You hardly see me anymore and now you don't even want me to come down to see *you*!'

'I have my reasons.'

'So you keep telling me' she replied sulkily.

'Are you saying you don't trust me?'

'Well what am I supposed to think?'

'You know I would tell you if I could' Lucas sighed miserably. 'You know I wouldn't deliberately do anything to upset you.'

There was a silence on the phone.

'Sian?'

'You say that' she replied. 'But now I'm not so sure.'

'Sian please…'

But she hung up on him.

Lucas let out a breath, shoulders sagging in disappointment as he closed his mobile, replacing it back in his pocket. He turned, faltering then at the sight of Lauralie who had been sneaking behind him on the way to the cupboard. She froze now as he stared at her, returning his gaze with a guilty expression, hand on the

cupboard door. Ebony stood in the doorway, watching the two of them uncertainly.

Lucas let out another breath, his attention sliding away from Lauralie. He walked past her, completely ignoring her before she had a chance to get on his nerves.

'Is everything alright?' Ebony asked him as walked by her.

He paused. 'Yes' he said quickly, a smile cracking his lips. 'Everything's fine.'

He left her before she had a chance to respond. Walking into the living room and sitting heavily in the empty space beside his brother. They began muttering quietly together.

On the other side of the sofa, Siren stiffened then. Leaning forwards she grabbed the orb which sat on the floor, staring at it intently.

'Oh my…'

'What is it?' Lucas asked, alarmed at her tone.

The elder guardians in the room all lifted their heads. Ebony and Lauralie returned to the living room, worry etched on both their faces.

'Your friend' Siren spoke as she consulted her orb. 'He is in great pain.'

'What?' Reuben exclaimed.

'Who?' Lucas spoke over him, heart rising in his chest.

Everyone in the room waited in the prolonged and agonizing silence that followed.

'Dammit Siren cut it out' Indigo ordered, losing his patience and rising. 'Just tell us what you know.'

'Quiet. I cannot see' she shot back.

'Please' Lucas groaned. 'If my friend is in danger I need to know. Who is it?'

Another silence.

'He has left this town' Siren spoke. 'He is travelling fast….to another.'

'Drake?' Lucas asked. 'Is it him?'

'Isn't he visiting his girlfriend today?' Ebony asked tentatively.

'If help doesn't reach him soon' Siren went on, 'he's going to die.'

The train was running fast along its tracks through the quieter part of the world. Drake saw only wide open fields through the window, and rolling hills dotted with clean white sheep newly sheared.

There was one more stop to make; the train was nearing its destination, and the carriages were mostly empty now. In the last was Drake, sitting with a vacant expression he rested his chin against his open hand, forehead pressed against the window, as the world outside went by. The sun came out from behind a cloud, shining brightly, Drake shielded his eyes squinting. It was warm in the compartment; the fresh air blowing in through the few open windows did little to cool the carriage.

Drake was brought out of his daydream abruptly as the door to the next carriage suddenly opened. Three figures entered, three of the most unusual characters Drake had ever seen.

These could only be guardians.

Drake slowly straightened, craning his head to get a better look at them.

The one who stood in front of the other two was a tall figure, with strong red eyes and long black hair. He wore a long white leather coat, the shoulders grey and the edges yellow.

The two flanking behind him stood with lowered profiles, as if submissive to their master. One of the figures was a young woman. She had long hair cut into two lengths, the top coloured dark brown and the bottom coloured blonde. She wore much red, with red boots, stockings and a red sash tied around her waist. Red shorts and a red garment that left her shoulders bare. The man by her side seemed to be dressed more casually. His face was hidden by a red hood and blonde hair that fell down around his head. He wore a white shirt, a black jacket and jeans. Modern clothes. He would have fitted perfectly into a crowd, had it not been for the three long spikes that he wore on his fists. They were exaggerated in length, gleaming and unforgiving.

The three stood at the head of the carriage. They seemed to be surveying the situation. The red hooded figure snarled like an animal, his attention turned to a woman sitting near the front of the carriage.

'Get. Out.'

She obeyed without question, clearly terrified. Forgetting her bags she rose quickly, seeming to completely see through the red eyed man. She hurried away with her head down, slipping past them and into the next carriage. It seemed she couldn't leave fast enough.

Drake realised then with growing trepidation that he was alone now in the carriage with the three strangers. He felt more afraid under the pressure of those terrible red eyes as the man stared straight at him.

The man walked forward, his heavy footfalls made his boots sound as if they were made of metal, adding to his threatening demeanour.

They surrounded him, the man with red eyes flanked by the woman with the two coloured hair, and the hooded man, his face concealed.

'Who are you?' Drake asked nervously, his palms beginning to sweat.

The red eyed man answered.

'I am the master' he purred in a deep voice.

The next few minutes remained for years to Drake lost in memory, repressed by the sudden trauma and shock that he suffered.

He was grabbed by the front of his shirt by the master. Thrown from his seat he hit the wall at the end of the compartment. The woman was screaming something at him, asking him something, though Drake couldn't remember what it was. The master was shouting something back at her; then at the hooded man. The hooded man came forwards, raising his steely fists as he did so. The spikes caught the light from beyond the windows, glinting brightly before they were lowered towards Drake.

'Where is he?' Lucas shouted, grabbing Siren by the shoulders and shaking her. 'You must tell me where he is!'

'There is nothing I can do' she spoke calmly back, holding the orb before her. 'He is far away. We would never reach him in time.'

'What? We can't just let him die!'

'He is many miles away' Siren told him firmly. 'If the others wanted to kill him, they would have done it by now.'

'Others?' Shire repeated, rising to her feet. 'You mean those ghastly creatures and their master?'

'Yes' Siren replied to her mother. 'The very same.' She lowered her eyes to the orb again. 'I can see them. I can see their faces.'

'What others?' Lucas demanded speaking to Shire. 'What are you talking about?'

'The same creatures that hunt Ebony' Shire told him. 'The same creatures that attacked this place trying to capture her.'

Lucas released Siren, letting her fall backwards onto the sofa.

'There must be something we can do?' Reuben said to the room. 'Anything!'

'Please' Lauralie spoke, tears of fear dampening her eyes. 'We must at least try.'

'I could fly to try to find him' the aberrant offered. 'It would do little good but at least it's better than nothing.'

'Good idea' Indigo said. 'We'll wait here for your return.'

'How will you find them?' Lauralie asked as Culture moved across the room.

'Their master' Culture grumbled, 'is like me. I can feel his presence. I will find him.'

Culture crawled carefully through the broken window and took off.

'Why do you suppose they did this?' Reuben asked when the aberrant was gone.

'It's because of me' Ebony said, speaking with regret. 'They are hurting you to try to get to me. They know that I care about all of you; they've learnt that much it seems. Perhaps they are threatening you to try to force me to give myself up to them.' She hung her head, holding herself as if suddenly cold. 'This is all because of me…perhaps I should have stayed alone. Perhaps I should give myself up.'

Lucas raised a hand in the air, reaching towards her in a comforting gesture as if to try to silence her negative thoughts.

They must have been watching us' Ebony realised, speaking aloud. 'I wonder how much about us they know, and how long they've been spying.'

Indigo put his hands on his hips, beginning to pace the room quickly as if losing patience. 'This is getting ridiculous' he said shooting an unfriendly glance towards Ebony. 'We should just take her and go.'

'Indigo' Shire barked, turning on him. 'You will not take this girl against her will! We are not kidnappers. We are not bad people. Do not let yourself stoop to such a level.'

'So you want to play their silly little game?' Indigo argued back. 'If we just leave with the philosopher's

stone, then there is nothing for them to bargain with because we would have already gone.'

'And risk the lives of these young guardians?' Shire snarled.

The young guardians Reuben, Lucas and Lauralie looked on silently as the elders decided their fate. Ebony stood impassive, expressionless, as if none of this bothered her.

'If we take Ebony then there is no reason for them to hurt anyone else' Indigo told Shire. 'We risk more harm by remaining here. Culture's not got long to live, and without him they have more chance of outnumbering and overpowering us.'

'We chose to put ourselves at risk by agreeing to this little quest' Shire replied, deadly quiet now. 'These young guardians did not choose to get dragged into this, and I will not leave this world until they and the philosopher's stones are safe' Shire clarified. '*Both* of them, whether they choose to stay here, or go to the Ancient World with us.'

'So you would kill our enemy' Indigo asked her, 'and let the philosophers stones stay here if they wanted?'

'If that's what it takes' Shire replied stubbornly.

Indigo shook his head. 'Fine' he said shrugging as if it didn't bother him either way. 'It was just a suggestion.'

'We have to help Drake' Lauralie whined desperately. 'Please, he's our friend.'

'I wouldn't worry too much' Siren voiced, her attention still turned to the orb. 'It seems he has a guardian angel watching over him.'

'What do you mean?' Reuben asked her.

'Crystal' Siren breathed. 'The white one, the first one we were chasing. She feels his pain. She is trying to find him.'

'Why?' Lauralie whispered.

Siren smiled.

'She wants to help him.'

The train had slowed to a stop, and the few passengers that were left on gradually departed.

There was a girl on the platform, one among many who waited for their loved ones to arrive.

Her name was Eleanor, dainty in build with large dark eyes. Her blue hair was dyed so dark that it looked almost black. She wore a white dress patterned with large red and blue flowers.

She stood on the tips of her feet to see over the heads of the crowd, which was difficult because she wasn't that tall. Starting to fidget with her handbag, she tickled her earring when the passengers stopped arriving off the train. Eleanor looked down the platform, then up, wondering if she had missed him, or if he was playing a trick on her.

But he wasn't there.

She boarded the train, moving from carriage to carriage and searching all the compartments.

'Drake? Drake are you here?'

She reached the last compartment, and shrieked.

There was blood everywhere. Drake was as pale as death.

Eleanor had come to the last compartment to find Drake collapsed, leaning back against the wall of the carriage.

His arm had been completely severed; just below the left shoulder was the cut. There was no sign of the limb.

He moaned, head lolling to the side.

Drake seemed to notice the figure walk in and scream. It took many seconds for him to realise it was Eleanor. He lifted his remaining arm towards her, body shaking.

'Help me…' he whispered.

The next thing he remembered after falling unconscious was a white ceiling. He had been taken back to the town he had travelled from and hospitalised.

He blinked, moving his head to the side and groaning.

'Drake!'

Eleanor leapt from her seat beside the hospital bed and leant over him. Caressing him tenderly, she brushed his forehead with the back of her hand, weaving her fingers through his hair. Tears were streaming down her face and she tried her best to compose herself, failing as the emotions overwhelmed her.

'Drake…my poor love…how do you feel?'

He turned away from her, looking instead to the left side of his body.

His left arm had been cut off.

'Oh god….'

Turning away again Drake began to gasp, breathing heavily and slipping into shock.

'Drake stay with me, stay with me.' Eleanor grasped his shoulder, shaking him. His eyes rolled back, and he sighed.

Then he was gone.

Later that night, when all was quiet and Drake was fast asleep and full of drugs, a figure visited. A girl dressed all in white, with long white hair and grey eyes. She stepped lightly across the room, her bare footsteps sounding loud in the otherwise silent room. She approached his bed, and touched him on the shoulder, filled with sorrow and grief.

'You poor boy. They did this to you because of me, and because of me, you have been made to suffer.'

A white light grew from her fingertips and lit up his shoulder. She closed her eyes, as the light began to grow, enveloping the room's darkest corners.

She escaped through the open window, leaving the faded curtains swaying in the breeze. The only evidence that she had ever been there, and the strange buzzing sound left behind in Drake's dreams, which reminded him of wings, like that of an insect. A dragonfly.

Chapter Eight

Second Visit

Culture had not been able to find Drake. The master had wandered away and become lost, and when Culture reached the train station, it was all but deserted. And so, Culture had returned several hours after his departure, coming to a tense atmosphere as everyone within the apartment tried to find things to occupy themselves with and make time pass quicker. It was dark outside now, and the night was wearing on. Siren was the one most relaxed in the group, as always she consulted the orb.

Culture entered the room through the window, straightening and sighing as he gratefully folded his tired wings.

'I've received a call from Eleanor' Lucas told him shortly. 'Drake is alive. He's in hospital, he's been badly injured.'

'But he will live?' the aberrant questioned.

'Yes' Lucas nodded. 'He will. We'll visit him in the morning, but now, I think we should get some sleep.'

'Can I stay another night?' Lauralie asked the brothers.

'Won't your parents worry where you are?' Reuben said.

'No' she replied shortly. 'They won't.'

'You can stay' Lucas told her. 'And I suppose the rest of you are staying as well?' he asked the room.

'Haven't got anywhere better to be' Indigo shrugged. 'Here is where one of the philosophers stones are at least' he said glancing to Ebony. 'We're staying.'

'Then I will see you in the morning' Lucas said turning away, not waiting for a response.

'Goodnight' Ebony mumbled to the room, before following the brothers down the corridor.

They went to their own bedroom, and she went to hers, and within the living room, the other guardians all lay down on the sofas and armchairs to sleep. Except for Culture. He remained standing, staring out of the window now, deep in thought.

'Crystal' he whispered to the night. 'Where are you?'

Monday morning

They woke early the next day, barely making time for any breakfast. They left the apartment shortly after, Reuben, Lucas, Lauralie and Ebony walked together. Behind them the four elder guardians marched, creating a V-formation as if they were guarding them.

Lucas turned back to speak, hesitating as he noticed this.

'Perhaps they can look at your heart when we get to the hospital' he suggested, speaking to Culture. 'Maybe there is something they can do to help.'

Culture tore his eyes away from Ebony to reply, he had been watching her closely.

'Normal humans would not be able to acknowledge an aberrant' Culture informed him. 'And even if they could see me….there is no cure for old age. But thanks for the concern' He added sarcastically.

At that moment a figure ran towards them from the other side of the street, Lucas recognised him as he got closer.

'Venom.'

'I came as soon as I heard' he said panting. Having received a text from Lucas early that morning informing him of what had happened, he had made his way quickly to the hospital, bumping into them along the way. 'Is he ok?' Venom asked.

'You know as much as we do at this point' Lucas told him. 'We're on the way to see him now.'

Venom's attention drifted past Lucas and towards the elder guardians who stood a few steps behind them. 'What are *they* still doing here?' Venom whispered to Lucas, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

'They insisted on coming with us' Lucas murmured in reply. 'I don't think they want to let Ebony out of their sight.' He shot a glance at her as he said this.

'Well let's go' Venom said. 'We don't want to keep him waiting.'

As they arrived at the front of the hospital they were surprised to find Eleanor waiting for them just outside the entrance doors.

'Is everything alright?' Reuben asked immediately, suddenly worried and wondering why she was not inside with Drake.

'Everything's fine' Eleanor answered quickly, looking from Reuben to Lucas; then to Lauralie and Venom. 'It's so good of you all to come.'

'Where is he?' Lauralie asked her, standing on her tip toes and craning her head to see inside the building. 'Is he inside? Is he waiting for us?'

'He's on his way out' Eleanor replied. 'He asked me to meet you out here first.'

Lauralie made a strange face, standing straight again and looking at Eleanor. 'What do you mean he's on his way out?'

'You mean he's coming *here*?' Reuben asked her, pointing to the ground they stood on. 'He's leaving the hospital?'

'The doctors declared him a medical miracle' Eleanor said. 'His arms has completely healed, and all in a single night.'

'It's Crystal' Ebony whispered to the others. She did this. She saved him.'

'So she has the power to heal…' Indigo purred, stroking his chin as he spoke to himself behind the younger guardians. 'How interesting.'

'Soon, very soon, we will see her' Siren spoke up. 'She blames herself for what happened to him, she will give herself up so no one else gets hurt.'

'I don't think I need to tell you this' Eleanor went on, completely oblivious to the presence of Ebony and the elder guardians, 'but when he comes out, don't

make a fuss about his arm. You know how he hates that sort of attention.'

'We know' Lucas nodded to her.

'Oh, and I told Sian what happened' Eleanor added hastily, speaking to Lucas. 'If you don't mind.'

'You did?' Lucas asked with worry.

'It's not a problem is it?'

'No' Lucas shook his head. 'No it's fine.'

The entrance doors opened then, and everyone straightened in attention, all of the younger guardians feeling nervous.

Drake stepped through the doors, emerging out of the hospital near enough his usual self.

He approached them; standing beside his girl-friend, he briefly acknowledged the elder guardians that stood in the background.

'Hey guys' Drake smiled tentatively. 'How you doing?'

The meeting was being watched from a short distance away. Kreas and Li sat hunched in the shadows between two buildings nearby, watching the scene with their master standing behind them.

'He's still alive' the master stated. No emotions revealed in his tone.

'Do you want us to finish him off?' Kreas asked excitedly, crouching in his animal-form.

'No' the master said flatly. 'We have other things to concentrate on.'

'Crystal must be nearby' Li stated, folding back her pointed ears and twitching her tail in agitation. 'She must have healed him.'

'Curious' the master said. 'It is curious how she is willing to help him. She must care for him' he said as he observed Drake. 'But why?'

'She's used some of her magic to heal him' Kreas chattered. 'She is weaker now, more vulnerable. Now is the time we catch her. It would take a long time for her to gather enough magic again that she could use.'

'She would risk herself be captured for the sake of…' the master trailed off. 'I must leave' he voiced suddenly, as Ebony lifted her head and began to look around as if sensing something, her eyes searching. 'If I remain here then I will eventually be noticed.'

'Should we stay and watch?' Li asked as the master made to go.

'Do what you must' the master said casually. 'I will meet up with you later.'

The master cast his hand out, summoning his magic before him. He vanished in a flash of light, leaving nothing behind.

Li rested her head back on the ground with a sigh, watching the group before the hospital. 'We cannot waste too much time in chasing the other philosopher's stone' she said. 'We've already lost one.'

'It's not lost' Kreas answered simply. 'It's just being kept safe for us.'

'Either way' Li replied patiently to her companion. 'We need to get her before too long, or else we risk losing her for good.'

'Worry not my love' Kreas said teasingly, nuzzling her. 'All will end well.'

'Drake nearly loses his life and he doesn't bother to tell me? What's wrong with him? I shouldn't have to hear it from Eleanor; I should have heard it from *him*.'

'Well why are you complaining to me about it?'

Sian turned to her brother, uncrossing her arms and forcing herself to breath calmly to control her fury.

'There's something not quite right about this' Sian went on. 'He's hiding something from me, I just know it. I'm going to see him. Today. I want you to come with me.'

Her brother Kyle looked up from his breakfast, gaping at her.

'You can't be serious.'

'I assure you I am absolutely serious.'

'Why in the hell would you want me to come with you?' he asked her.

'For protection.'

'Protection?' Kyle barked. 'Ha! Since when have you needed someone to protect you? You've always been able to hold your own.'

'I know' she sighed, staring miserably out of the window. 'I don't think Lucas is who I thought he was. At least not anymore.' She watched the boats on the river sailing back and forth through the choppy waters. Her hometown was very different to the one Lucas came from; it was more open, cleaner and quieter. 'I

don't know what he is now' Sian murmured sadly, speaking almost to herself. 'But I want to find out.'

'When are we leaving?' Kyle asked her, returning his attention back to his breakfast.

'Now.'

'Now?'

'Now' Sian repeated.

'Can I just finish my-'

'No' Sian cut in. 'We are leaving now.'

After a brief meeting, Drake had decided to return home. Eleanor would be staying with him for a while it was decided. Venom went home too, and even Lauralie they managed to shrug off, admitting at last that she should probably be going as well. Though on this occasion, she left with more confidence, turning away offers to be escorted along the way. She walked with a spring in her step, and her head held high.

'You lot had better be going too' Lucas said to the elder guardians, glad to see Lauralie go at long last and hoping the others who remained would do the same.

'Nice try' Indigo smirked. 'We're going nowhere. Not without *her* anyway' he said jerking his head towards Ebony.

'You can't force her to leave' Lucas argued.

'I could if I wanted' Indigo muttered under his breath.

'What was that Indigo?' Shire asked dangerously.

'Nothing nothing' he said hastily, laughing and waving at her. 'Don't worry yourself.'

'*I* must leave however' Shire said, ignoring Indigo from then on.

'What do you mean?' Siren asked turning to her. 'Where are you going?'

'I must return to the Ancient World' her mother explained. 'I can no longer be of use here. I have no powers to protect now; I would do more harm than good if I stayed. I must leave' she said again.

'Will you be alright?' Siren asked sadly.

'Of course my darling child' Shire said embracing her daughter lovingly. 'But I have no powers to open a portal. You must help me. Can you do that?'

'Yes mother' Siren nodded obediently.

'I had to give my powers away' Shire told her, 'to save a life. Do you understand?'

'Yes mother.'

Shire let go of her daughter, resting her hands on her shoulders.

'I hope so' she said. 'You must stay here and help protect the philosopher's stones. And…' she added with a glance towards Indigo and speaking now in a whisper to her daughter. 'Keep an eye on *him*.'

'Yes mother' Siren whispered back.

'Keep yourself safe' Shire said straightening.

The child's eyes grew wide, large and beautiful in their misty blue colour, so unlike her mothers. Siren tilted her head in understanding.

'I'm going to miss you.'

'As I will miss you' Shire smiled kindly.

The aberrant flexed his wings, dipping his head to her. 'We may not see each other again' he warned.

'I know.'

'I will return' Indigo said, 'to the Ancient World, when all of this is done.'

Shire bowed her head respectively to him.

At a polite suggestion from Indigo, Reuben, Lucas and Ebony followed them out of the town, and to the same spot where they had first met Crystal. From atop the hill where the three now sat, could be seen the abandoned park, once so loved, now overgrown and wild.

'They're fascinating aren't they?' Ebony smiled as she watched the guardian's small profiles at the bottom of the hill.

Lucas glanced sideways at her, and found himself thinking suddenly how beautiful she was, as the light from the sun glistened on her flawless skin. Her features were perfect, short black hair sleek and shining, and her eyes bright pink were so unusual yet so pleasant.

'They are indeed' he agreed.

They watched as the guardians used their magic to open a rift in the air, a light shining brightly through. Shire touched each of the three remaining guardians in turn, her daughter last, giving them a final farewell, before she stepped through the portal.

'And then there were three' Lucas sighed.

'Wait a minute' Reuben suddenly voiced from beside him. 'What day is it today? Aren't we supposed to be in college?'

Lucas smiled warmly, turning to him.

'You know what?' he said. 'I think you're right.'

Reuben let out a heavy sigh, turning back towards the three remaining guardians.

'Life…' he uttered, '…has become so strange…'

'It doesn't matter' Lucas told him, 'they're only exams…'

Ebony glanced silently from one brother to the other, her pink eyes shining. She looked back at the elder guardians, and wondered in her mind.

What will happen next?

Lucas, Reuben and Ebony made their way slowly back to the apartment. The remaining three guardians trailing after them almost like a parade.

They entered the block of flats; walking in circles up the concrete stairs to the floor the apartment was located. They reached the correct level; Lucas went to open the broken door. But before he could touch the handle, the door opened itself. In the doorway stood a beautiful young woman, with tanned skin and dark hair, and a completely unsatisfied expression.

'Hello' she said. 'Lucas.'

'Sian!' Lucas spluttered, utterly bewildered to find her there. 'What are you doing here?'

Instead of replying, Sian turned her cynical gaze to Reuben.

'Reuben.' She said. 'I half expected Lucas to have another woman by his side.'

Lucas nervously shot a half-glance towards Ebony, who was standing right behind him. She slowly began to slink away. Knowing she was completely invisible now to none-guardians, yet not wanting to take the risk in case that changed, especially with this one.

'Nice door' Sian went on, leaning against the door frame and crossing her arms as if she owned the place. She cast her eyes critically over the badly repaired door with a sneer; the great cracks and splinters were more than clearly visible.

'Let me in Sian' Lucas said patiently.

Sian pushed herself off the doorframe, straightening up she backed away to allow the brothers to enter. After them came the three elder guardians, approaching slowly. Ebony chose to wait outside unprompted.

'What happened to the coffee table?' Sian asked, looking at the shattered remains of the table that had been utterly destroyed. 'Did you put your mug down too hard? And the window' Sian said glancing towards it. 'What happened to that? Did a bird fly into it?'

'Sian. What are you doing here?' Lucas asked flatly. 'I'm not in the mood for your games.'

'I thought I'd come along to see what was going on. You've been hiding something from me' she said. 'And I want to know what it is.'

'Hey' Indigo smirked, moving around the room to stand closer to her, looking her up and down. 'I like this one. Is she your girlfriend Lucas? Looks like you've bitten off more than you can chew.'

Sian turned to him. Indigo immediately backed away as if he had been burnt. Fearful he had been seen he fell silent. The entire room watched her now.

Sian's eyes moved around the spot where Indigo stood, as his presence hung on the edge of her consciousness, as she searched for what disturbed her. Eventually she turned away, facing Lucas again defiantly.

'I think you should leave' Lucas dared to say.

'No' Sian said, crossing her arms stubbornly and taking a seat in the middle of the sofa. She stared at him deliberately. 'I think I will stay. Right…here…'

Lucas covered the distance between them. He grabbed her by the shoulders, lifting her up and snarling through gritted teeth.

'Enough of your stupid games!'

In an instant and out of nowhere came another body. Lucas was punched hard in the side of the head, stumbling sideways, confused and unsure of what had just happened and who had hit him. Reuben immediately charged forwards to protect his brother, grabbing the one who had struck Lucas and drawing his fist back in violence.

'Enough!' Sian called out, before anyone else could get hurt. 'Kyle let him go.'

Her brother obeyed instantly, shoving Reuben back and nearly tripping him up. As soon as he was free from Kyle's grasp, Reuben ran to Lucas, helping him back to his feet.

Lucas groaned as he rose, tentatively touching the side of his head which was already beginning to swell.

'I'm going to *kill* you for that' Reuben snarled at Kyle, temper flaring almost beyond his control. He still held onto his brother's arm in support, his body began to tremble in rage.

Kyle's muscles began to twitch in anticipation. He was a powerful and tall figure, with a stern expression.

'Just try it' Kyle mocked him. 'I could snap you like a twig.'

'Wanna bet?!'

'Reuben!' Lucas barked before the words turned physical again. 'Just calm down everyone.' He straightened up, raising his head and taking his arm away from Reuben who supported him. 'I'm fine' he muttered to him.

The three elder guardians now giving them extra space, stood by the far wall, amazed at the turn of events. Ebony was nowhere to be seen.

'Lucas' Sian said placing a hand on her hip. 'We need to talk.'

Chapter Nine

Discovered

Tuesday morning

Reuben and Lucas stood side by side outsides the gates of the college. Together they stared inwards to its grounds and buildings within, and to the other people who were entering the college. Other people who led normal lives.

'They're so blissfully ignorant' Lucas grumbled shaking his head. 'If only they knew.'

'If only they did' Reuben agreed. 'Things would be a lot different if that were the case. That much is for sure.'

'You're not going in are you?' Indigo said casually, standing a short distance behind them.

'No' Lucas sighed forlorn. 'As time goes on I feel less and less a part of this world.'

Culture nearby disinterested picked at his teeth, and Siren leant back against a tree, clinging to the shadows of its canopy.

'There's no going back now is there?' Lucas asked.

'No' Siren replied. 'You are part of this now, what you have seen and learnt….' She trailed off. 'You belong in the Ancient World.'

Reuben shrugged. 'It's not like we've got family here is it?' he spotted Lauralie, Venom and Ebony over his shoulder. 'We'd be taking our friends with us' he added.

'I'm sure Lauralie would follow us wherever we went' Lucas sighed regretfully. 'Venom would surely follow *her*. And Ebony….' he lifted his head, meeting her gaze. 'She would follow me wherever I went.'

'What about Sian?' Reuben asked his brother in a whisper.

Lucas glanced towards her. Sian was standing a distance away from the others, crossing her arms and glaring at him. Her loyal brother Kyle stood close by, staring up at the clouds.

'I uh…I need to think about that…'

'She can't follow us to the Ancient World if we chose to go' Reuben said.

'I suppose…' Lucas began slowly.

'Oh you would love it there' Siren butted it. 'Guardians are more accepted in the Ancient World than they are here. None magical folk are able to see magic in our world. It's a normal thing for them.'

'I don't doubt' Lucas commented dryly.

'You'd be welcomed by the king' Siren went on. 'You never know, you might even fight for him one day.'

'What would we be fighting for?' Reuben asked.

'The king needs guardians' Siren explained. 'They restore peace in times of strife, and maintain order. They are the thirteen.'

'Thirteen?' Reuben echoed. 'Why thirteen?'

'If too many guardians are together for long periods of time, the most bizarre thing happens. It's something we refer to as magic poisoning. The air becomes thick and weakens our bodies, it is a gradual process, but you will learn much more about so many things you didn't know when you visit our world. But know that thirteen guardians are the limit, and only thirteen.'

'Sounds like fun' Lucas droned.

'Oh my goodness!' Lauralie cried out suddenly, staring at her wristwatch. 'I'm going to be late! I said I'd meet the brothers in town.'

'Adrian and Diz?' Reuben asked curiously turning back to her. 'What for?'

'You'll see if you want to come along…but I have to go!'

She dashed off; heading down the narrow concrete path, a shortcut towards the town, the rest of the group stared curiously after her as her beautiful ginger hair swished behind her.

'She seems eager' Venom said offhandedly. 'But shouldn't she be going to college instead?'

'She probably won't go for the same reason we won't' Reuben said. 'Life is just different now.'

Lucas nodded.

'So……' Reuben said, 'which one do you think she will pick?'

Lucas smirked.

'What is he talking about?' Ebony whispered to Venom.

'Drake was so kind to introduce Lauralie to the two street dancing brothers' Venom explained. 'She's become very fond of them.'

'That sounds like fun' Ebony gleamed. 'We should go see them perform.'

'We should' Venom agreed. 'You guys should come too' Venom called to the brothers.

'Ok!' Reuben sang happily back. 'Let's go.'

'I'll meet up with you later' Lucas said.

'What?'

'I…' Lucas began, his attention drifting towards Sian. 'I need to speak to her.'

Reuben clapped a hand on his shoulder. 'Well…good luck. Seriously.' His expression turned sombre. 'Good luck.'

'Thanks Reuben. I'll call you later.'

Reuben backed away, turning and joining Ebony and Venom. The three wandered off in the direction of the town, shadowed as had become the habit, by the elder guardians. Not yet had they let Ebony out of their sights. They guarded her so closely. Indigo, Culture, and Siren.

Once they were gone, Lucas approached Sian. She uncrossed her arms as he drew nearer.

'You're serious about this aren't you?' she asked him.

Kyle wandered away to give them privacy, slipping out of view. But Lucas knew he would not go far.

'Serious about what?' Lucas asked.

'This whole business' she said. 'Guardians and magic. You say there is another world out there somewhere.'

'And I meant every word.' Lucas lifted his eyes to meet hers. 'I told you you wouldn't believe me.'

'But I do' she gleamed slyly back.

'What?'

'Well' Sian continued moving away from him. 'The options are, either you are crazy.' She came to a stop. 'Or' she said, turning back to him, 'everything you say is true.'

'And you think everything I've told you is true?' Lucas asked incredulous.

'Well' Sian cooed seductively, moving closer to him now. 'It is far more preferable to believing you're crazy. Don't you think?' she brushed a strand of his black hair back from his face, leaning forwards for a quick kiss. 'You're not crazy are you Lucas?'

'No' he said, as she moved back from him.

Her expression became serious again. 'I want to be a guardian.'

'What?'

'I said' Sian repeated. 'I want to be a guardian, like you. I want to see magic as you do, see guardians, and maybe, visit this other world you told me about.'

'I don't know if I can make that happen' Lucas told her.

'Well' Sian purred. 'There's no rush.' She leant forwards again, embracing him tightly. 'I just want to be closer to you' she whispered in his ear.

Lucas held her also, trying to feel a stir of emotions towards her, the same as he used to.

But there was nothing.

'Oh my god I'm so sorry I'm late' Lauralie said bounding forwards.

Adrian took his foot off the fountain he was leaning against and faced her, immediately turning on his swagger.

'Oh my fine lady' he sighed, 'you're not late, you're just in time, it is we who are early.'

He flicked his collar up and swept his red streaked hair dramatically back, bowing to her and taking her hand in his.

'Oh Adrian enough of that' she laughed, 'we know each other well enough now don't we?'

'Not well enough for my satisfaction I'm afraid' Adrian sighed dramatically, eyeing her now with longing.

The sadness in him did nothing to sway her; instead she turned her back to him so she wouldn't have to see his over dramatized misery. Diz took this opportunity to jump on her from behind, hanging off her shoulders and ruffling her hair.

'I'm so glad to see you' he squealed in girlish excitement.

'Me too Diz' Lauralie giggled patting his arm.

He let go of her, dropping to the floor, he had to jump a considerable height in order to reach her, short that he was.

She turned back to face them. Adrian was giving the both of them a sceptical look, and Diz was smiling sweetly up at Lauralie, kicking his feet and sucking on a lolly.

'Want one?' he offered her.

'Why thank you' Lauralie said taking the orange lolly he offered. She thought then of how insanely cute he was, with his blonde highlights in his light brown hair, his little button nose, and the same unnatural piercing bright blue eyes he shared with his brother.

'I'd save that for later' Adrian told her. 'We've got some dancing to do.'

'We sure do' Diz gleamed, jumping up and down on the spot.

Adrian gave Lauralie a sly glance to the side.

'Are you ready?'

Lauralie jerked her hips to the side, flicking her hair back and rolling her shoulders seductively.

'I'm ready' she said.

Adrian purred, flashing his teeth at her. 'I think we may have taught you too much.'

'That remains to be seen' Lauralie answered, walking her fingers up Adrian's chest teasingly. 'If I impress the crowd, then we will know if you have taught me enough.' She poked the end of his nose. 'Are *you* ready for this?'

'Ooohhh' Diz said leaning forwards. 'You're getting pretty confident.'

'I've had good teachers' Lauralie cooed down to him.

'Now come on' Adrian told her. 'We wouldn't want to keep our audience waiting.'

Lauralie took centre stage, with the brothers standing either side of her a few steps back.

They were in the town now, one of the busier places where the shops were, and already people were slowing down to see what was happening, as a small crowd began to form.

The music started slow, beginning first with a rhythmic beat, and growing louder as the sounds began to build. Lauralie was the first to move, moving her shoulders and her arms first she danced for a few seconds as the brothers remained still behind her. Freezing then she allowed them to copy her. The music lapsed, becoming silent for moments, before returning again in full. The three danced together, their moved perfectly matched, as if they were all controlled by the same mind.

Through the crowed easing their way to the front came Venom, Reuben and Ebony. Standing side by side they watched the trio dance. Venom watched Lauralie with longing, and the same desire for her as Lauralie had for the brothers when she had first watched them dance. And the audience loved her, as they had loved the performance when it was just the brothers dancing.

Venom glanced to the side and saw, as always that the elder guardians were not too far away. Standing in a small huddle at the edge of the crowd and looking inwards, Siren as usual, holding the strange orb in her hands. She was not watching the dance, but staring into the orb.

The performance ended just as Lucas arrived with Sian and Kyle. Lauralie turned, beaming at the

audience, their cheering and clapping was rolling and continuous. Adrian bowed to the surrounding audience and backed away, giving the centre stage to Lauralie, Diz smiling and waving moved beside his brother.

'I sense a change in her' Diz muttered under his breath to Adrian as they stood behind her.

Adrian straightened up, putting his hands on his hips.

'I sense it too.' He furrowed his brow at her. 'I wonder what it is.'

Reuben was clapping with the others; she was truly a sight to behold. Lauralie was a beautiful girl, all the guys wanted her, and all the girls wanted to be her, perfect body, stunning looks, but when she danced….

'I've never seen anything like it' Reuben said in awe to Lucas beside him.

'That was excellent' Ebony said clapping as she stood beside Venom.

Venom didn't seem to share her enthusiasm. Instead he stared vacantly at Lauralie, sadness descending over him.

Lauralie lowered her arms and turned back to the brothers, her expression dreamy.

The audience faded, the calls and whistles and the clapping. Silence began to peak.

The world suddenly began to turn grey, almost like a dream.

Siren's hands began to shake around the orb, her knuckles whitening, her eyes growing large.

'She's been found….'

Indigo whipped round, staring wildly at her, on her other side Culture's heart began to race.

'What should we do?' Siren pleaded.

'Lucas!' Indigo cried, rushing over to him. 'They've found a philosophers stone.'

Ebony gasped, hands over her mouth and staring at Lucas in fear and expectation.

'Crystal….' She breathed.

'We must leave' Indigo ordered them.

'What do you…?' Lucas began.

Culture's eyes darted back and forth over the heads of the people who were utterly oblivious to anything that was out of place, his body stiff and jittery. He saw an aberrant claw its way over the roof of a building, tearing forwards with all haste and heading in a direction that led out of the town.

'What's in that direction?' Culture demanded of Lucas.

'The industrial estate' Lucas fumbled. 'The abandoned hotel!' he realised.

'I know where that is' Indigo said.

'We must help her.' Siren's voice was raised in panic. 'We must!'

Indigo's eyes flashed. His hand darted out towards Ebony, grabbing her by the wrist.

'What are you doing?' she cried out in panic over Lucas' protests.

'Do not fear' Indigo told Lucas and Ebony, 'we must help Crystal, but we cannot leave Ebony.' He took hold of Lucas' wrist also, vanishing the three of them into thin air.

'We may need your help also' Culture told Reuben, who stood there looking bewildered. 'And yours' he said to Venom.' He grabbed the both of them by their arms and using his magic, took them to the edge of the town.

Reuben felt something grabbing the back of his shirt as he was transported away, to the abandoned hotel, where they had not been to in so long. His feet touched the ground, eyes adjusting to the new light and environment. The thing that had grabbed him from behind released him then, and Reuben turned, gasping in surprise.

'Sian?!'

She quickly turned away from him, her face a horrible tint of green. Her body hunched forwards as she was violently sick. Culture who had travelled them from the town centre released them from his grasp. Exhausted from using so much magic to transport himself and three others he collapsed, falling to his knees and clutching his chest.

'Culture get up' Indigo hissed nearby, 'get up get up!'

Lucas and Ebony gave him worried looks as he slowly rose, gasping and wobbling as if he was dizzy. Culture however insisted that he was fine.

The colour swiftly drained out of Lucas' face as he noticed Sian was with them.

'Oh shit…'

'What's *she* doing here?' Venom demanded.

'Ebony' Indigo said to her. 'Hide.'

She didn't need prompting, and swiftly left their side to comply.

'And take Sian with you' Lucas added.

Ebony grabbed Sian by the arm as she went. Sian jerked her head upwards towards Ebony, gasping in shock that she could at last see her after being touched.

'Who are you?!'

'No time' Ebony hastened. 'We must hide.'

Too confused to protest, Sian allowed herself to be dragged away, wiping her mouth as she went. The two swiftly vanished from view, hiding behind the wreckage left over from the construction of the hotel.

It was then that Siren materialized herself between the small group.

'Ebony is safe?'

'She is hiding' Indigo replied to her.

'We should have enough of a chance' Siren said, glancing back at the three younger guardians, Lucas, Reuben and Venom. 'Even without Shire' she sighed. 'Can you three fight?'

'We can try' Reuben said.

Venom stared defiantly at her and Lucas remained impassive.

'We must hurry' Culture pressed. 'She is near. I can feel her fear…'

They ran to the other side of the building, Culture leading the way. Around the corner they found them.

Crystal was on her knees, dirt smeared her white dress as the master held her by the hair. The vile beasts Kreas and Li were flanking her, ensuring there was no way for her to escape.

'Let her go!' Culture ordered, coming to a stop as the other guardians gathered around him.

'And what?' The master sneered, 'you'll let us live? You'll kill us quickly? Spare me your worthless lies and face me in a battle like *real* guardians.'

Culture charged towards the master without pause, tearing forwards with his burning wheels of fire summoned in his hands. The chakrams whirled, leaving behind streams of blazing red flames which lasted only seconds, before being replaced again by more. The master however was ready, throwing Crystal aside to confront him. He blocked the attack from Culture's chakrams with his own weapon, twin gun blades. Either side Kreas and Li transform into their human selves. Li summoned forth a mighty scythe, powered by magic. Startling red in colour with a great eye at its head, and what looked like veins pulsing to the tip of the blade. Siren arched her body, swinging her head back and throwing her arms out. The orb she held grew and divided, lifting in the air and spinning bizarrely around her in orbit. Li rushed forwards to meet Siren, as Indigo beside them drew forth a slender sword hidden beneath his robes. He twirled the blade, thrusting it forwards in perfect precision towards Li as she advanced, only to be deflected by Kreas' weapon, three long blades protruding from a garment he wore on his wrists.

Siren met Li with her own magic, the blade from the scythe colliding with one of the many circling orbs. Indigo fought viciously with Kreas nearby, the long cruel claws that he wore over his knuckles, exaggerated in length flew about the air wildly. The two dancing around each other and the blades, each already suffered slashes over their bodies and faces. And between the two fighting pairs, Culture fought with the master, quickly

however he was losing ground. The master's attacks were relentless.

Lucas, Reuben and Venom ran over to Crystal, too close for comfort to the fighting. Crystal was too close to danger; one of the enemies could easily grab her. Just a slit of the throat and her life would be ended.

How fragile the body could be.

Lucas reached her as she was attempting to crawl away. Coming to her level and glancing nervously back at the fighting that was happening so close by.

'Crystal.'

Crystal was hunched over, sobbing into her hands, her white hair dragging in the dirt.

Reuben dared a glance back to the fighting, and saw Kreas lunge again at Indigo, pushing forward and roaring like an animal. His face seemed to grow, his eyes glowing red and his teeth sharpening. It was like he was teetering on the edge of transformation. A truly frightening sight to behold.

The master leapt back, throwing his arms out straight he fired. The bullet from one of the guns grazed Culture's head as he charged towards him. Culture suddenly threw his arms out, cutting the master's hands with his chakrams and forcing him to disarm. The master with his hands free grabbed him by the throat, Culture made to slash his arm, but the master caught him by the wrist, dangerously close to the flames. Culture made to attack with his free arm, aiming again for the master as he still choked. But blocked again by

the master's other arm Culture coughed violently as he was released. Able to breathe now but with both his wrists held by the master he was trapped, staring back at his opponents red eyes that glinted with pure pleasure and ecstasy. Culture's head snapped sharply back as the master head butted him. He was released, his nose bloody. He stumbled disorientated, shaking himself to try to clear his mind. The master danced back several steps, holding both is gun blades in his hands, he had summoned them from where they had fallen, and now he lured Culture on teasingly.

Culture lowered his shoulders, marching laboriously towards him. The master shot again, this time Culture blocked the bullet with the magic from his chakrams. He lowered them, as his pace quickened. They fought again, the master using the blades of his weapons to fight the aberrant, quickly gaining the upper hand. More and more did Culture begin to tire, he was sweating, and short of breath. The discomfort spread to his arms, neck and jaw. The master smiled in satisfaction, and Culture, after several minutes of struggling, dropped his weapons. No longer able to hold them, they slipped from his fingers. He was too weak to wield the magic and so they vanished into thin air. Culture collapsed. All his old symptoms, suddenly magnified by ten. He fell forwards and retched, throwing up the entire contents of his stomach. When he looked up next, the master was before him, though his arms were relaxed. Culture stared blearily up at him, gasping and weak. The master suddenly grabbed him roughly by the shoulder, having dropped one of his gun blades to do so. He now moved backwards with Culture

in his grasp, pointing the barrel of the gun blade he held at point blank range to his head. Culture moaned in agony, clutching his chest in panic and fear of his coming end. He fell to his knees again, and the master released him, and watched passively.

'Weak hearts' he spoke in a dead tone as he watched the aberrant's demise. 'Short lives…

Culture was gasping. He gave a few more breaths, before his body slumped, and he fell to the side. The life left him, and he became utterly still. Finally, the pain had gone away, as his heart stopped beating.

'Rest' the master said down to him. 'You are in a better place now.'

He watched, as the magic left his body, ascending towards the sky. He then turned his attention menacingly, towards Crystal. Towards Venom, and the brothers.

Reuben's head shot up, fear filled him as he saw the master approaching. He grabbed Crystal before him, trying to pull her to her feet.

'Crystal! We have to get out of here!'

'It's no use' she whispered back, a dead weight in his grip. Reuben barely heard her. 'There is nowhere I can run where he will not find me. Not now.'

Reuben rose to his feet, looking around him desperately. As if some solution would come to hand. The master was nearly upon them. Reuben leapt over Crystal's body, caught by a sudden surge of madness and bravery and foolishness. Fearlessly he charged

towards the master, bringing forth his razor light spell. The gold flash from the magic left a white light in his sights, blinding him for seconds from all else.

The master gasped, as if emotionally hurt. He took a step back, brushing his cheek tenderly. There was only a single narrow cut on his face; the rest of him was unscathed.

Reuben backed away then, suddenly very frightened.

'What?' he cried. 'The spell should have worked!'

The master lowered his hand. 'Young guardians' he said. He furrowed his brow, and then he smiled, revealing sharpened teeth. 'What fun!'

He grabbed Reuben by the shoulder, balling his fist and sending an aim at his stomach, twisting his wrist before the impact. Reuben doubled over in agony. He was thrown to the side as Venom rose to meet the master, shooting balls of lighting his way. His magic now as familiar to him as a friend he had known for years, and as easy to summon as it was to breath. The master deflected the bolts of lightning with a mere flick of his hand, reaching out to strike Venom, but suddenly darting to the side, avoiding a strike that came from Lucas.

The master straightened up, facing each of the three younger guardians who stared at him in defiance.

'Keep away!' Lucas ordered him. 'We're not afraid of you.'

'Oh?' the master replied curiously. 'That's a shame.'

Reuben lifted himself off the ground, moving towards his brother, he stood hunched, holding his

stomach where he had been hit. Reuben with a great effort straightened, grimacing as he did. The master watched his discomfort with pleasure.

'You are not afraid of me' the master said, 'we will have to remedy that.'

They fought then, all three of the younger guardians against the master, attacking him from all sides. But the master hardly seemed to notice them; deflecting their attacks easily and pushing them all back. He struck the brothers upon their head with magic simultaneously, nearly knocking them out. They stumbled back dizzy and in pain, leaving only Venom to face him alone. The master summoned one of the gun blades to his side, stabbing the point of the end into his shoulder. Venom cried out, falling to his knees and trying to push the weapon out of him as the master forced it deeper into his flesh.

The master gleamed a cruel grin as Venom moaned in agony, eyes wild.

'I love the sound of pain' the master cried, suddenly mad. 'When I hear a man scream…my stomach lifts, and I am filled with a lust that nothing else can satisfy!'

'Twisted freak' Venom gasped.

The master wrenched the blade from him, pushing him backwards, Venom began to crawl away.

'Hey!' Lucas called to him as the master advanced towards Venom, no doubt intent on hurting him again.

The master slowed gradually to a stop, easing his sights towards his new target. He watched.

Lucas bowed his head, holding himself tense. From his back, something grew. Lucas moaned as he straightened up.

'Ahhhh' the master purred curiously, lifting his head. 'Of this I have never seen before. How interesting. How interesting indeed.'

They were huge in size, and a magnificent dark bronze colour with perfect formation. They had grown slowly from his body, their sharp edges cutting slits in the fabric of his clothes, now they spread outwards, casting great shadows upon the ground.

'Wings' the master breathed. 'Fascinating, but they will not save you.'

Lucas leapt to the sky, taking flight and soaring in an arch. But it was seconds before the master caught him. Lucas didn't know how he did so, but he was struck with a blow to the head by a spell cast out by the master who remained on the ground. He fell out of the sky, hitting the earth hard and falling awkwardly on his wings. Lucas was out in the open.

Reuben and Venom ran forwards to confront the master. Reuben slashing the air with his spells, Venom summoning his lightning powers. The master however, watching their approach from a distance could not be caught off guard as he had been with Lucas. He now knew what to expect. He danced with them, using their own attacks against them to his advantage, tricking them, teasing them. The pair grew ever more frustrated, their concentration falling.

They had lured the master away from Lucas and Crystal. Crystal had risen now, attempting to drag Lucas away from the others and closer to safety. But his unconscious dead weight coupled with his wings rendered him near enough impossible to even budge,

and Crystal skidding on her heels fell back down, panting furiously.

'You're so heavy!' she cried in despair. 'How do you fly?' She tried again, pausing in wonder to see Reuben now flying through the sky, with wings just like his brother's.

'So they have the same powers' she whispered.

She watched them fight.

Venom had been left on the ground, nursing his injury. It was only the master and Reuben who fought now, the master levitating and flying by some invisible force, for he had no wings, but walked, ducked and fought in mid air. He moved as if he stood on the ground, fighting with Reuben as he flew. And as Crystal stared up helplessly, the master met Reuben with a blow. Crystal saw in the sunlight a glint of the knife the master had pulled from his sleeve, so cleverly hidden it was. Reuben gasped, straining for breath. He had been stabbed between the ribs. Slowly, tipping back, he fell out of the sky.

'Lucas!' Crystal screamed in desperation. 'Open your eyes!'

Almost as if under her control his eyes shot open. He rose quickly, moving forwards and soaring through the air towards the master, and towards his brother as he fell. Lucas managed to grab and hold onto Reuben by the arm as he fell, spreading his wings to slow their descent and brining them both gently to the ground.

He let out a long deep sigh of relief; coming back down to earth he relaxed his grip on Reuben.

'Are you alright brother?' Lucas hastened.

'Oh yeah' Reuben groaned through gritted teeth as he lay on his back. 'I feel fine.' A smile tweaked his lips, though only for a moment, before turning sour.

Lucas leant over his brother, seeing the wound inflicted by the knife.

'Reuben' Lucas whined. 'You've punctured a lung.'

Reuben spluttered, turning his head to the side and coughing up blood.

'Oh Reuben' Lucas whispered.

'I'll be ok' he groaned, 'just give me a minute.'

'I don't have the power to heal him' Crystal uttered coming over to them. 'I'm so sorry…'

Lucas raised his head at the sound of movement to his side. Sian ran to him, with Ebony right behind her.

'Sian, what are you doing…?' Lucas asked in amazement.

Sian didn't answer; instead she stared down at Reuben, who was slowly bleeding out.

Sian got down on her knees; reaching forwards she touched Reuben at his chest, covering the wound with both her hands. She closed her eyes as a light began to grow from between her fingers and over the wound. She used her newly gained magic to heal.

Above them, still floating in the air, the master watched coldly. His attention wavered from the young guardians, and towards the beasts Kreas and Li that fought nearby. They were locked in combat with the guardians Indigo and Siren.

Li screamed in furry, slashing the air with her scythe. Its range was long, and its blade sharp. Siren ducked, saving herself from its blow. She straightened again, throwing back her hood. One of the many orbs flew towards Li in a gentle curve. Li leant back, arm thrown upwards, her scythe back behind her. The ball rippled, as if made of water. The atmosphere turned grey, Li's movements slowed, and she struggled to steady herself. Siren directed her orbs, smooth and steady she was, her movements controlled. Li then screwed her eyes tight shut, she stumbled. Dropping her scythe and throwing her head back in a scream of agony. Siren sent another orb her way, trapping her way now. Li gasped as she became surrounded, gripped by a raw and primal fear only those faced with their own deaths experienced. Siren cast her hands out, completing the spell. The orbs shattered into a thousand million pieces, littering the floor all around them with tiny shards of dark glass.

Li collapsed as dead weight, her eyes glazed over. Siren turned from her, sparing her not a second thought. She ran to help Indigo, who struggled under the rage and might that was Kreas. She joined Indigo in the fight. Kreas spun round at the sight of her, swinging both his arms. In seconds he transformed to his animal self, screeching and crying. Indigo leapt onto his back, showering the beast with a spell that cut and dug deep into his spine and forehead, while Siren attacked the legs from behind.

From above the master watched as the scuttling black creature was tormented by the two guardians. He struggled, not to attack, but to defend and keep himself

alive. When the master had had enough, he called down to Kreas in a short sharp whistle. Kreas broke away from the two guardians, turning he fled, howling in pain at his injuries, and at the sight of Li, who lay there dead in his sight. Kreas howled in pain and frustration, fleeing from the scene into places unknown. When the elder guardians Siren and Indigo looked up at the sky together, they saw that the master too, was gone.

Lucas embraced his brother tightly in relief that he was still alive. The wound in seconds had been fully healed by Sian, who was now by Venom's side, healing his injury also.

Ebony and Crystal looked on sadly, as Siren and Indigo knelt by the dead body of the aberrant Culture.

They surrounded him, and began to mourn.

Chapter Ten

Lagoon

Indigo lifted the body of Culture in his arms, turning from the others and walking away.

'What about the other one?' Siren asked his back, glancing towards the still body of Li.

Indigo hesitated.

'We cannot leave her' Siren insisted. 'It wouldn't be right.'

Indigo nodded, holding Culture close to him. The aberrant's large wings dragged on the ground as he walked away.

'Can one of you carry her?' Siren said to the young guardians.

Venom stepped forwards tentatively. The others watched as he approached the body, his footsteps crunching on the broken glass that surrounded Li. He knelt, lifting her in his arms. He looked into her face.

'She's beautiful' he said sadly.

Siren came to his side, staring down at Li.

'We must honour the dead' Siren told him. 'Be they a friend, or an enemy.'

A short way away Indigo had used his magic to disappear into thin air.

'Come' Siren whispered to Venom, lifting her hand towards him to do the same. The others drew closer to her.

Reuben and Lucas stuck close to each other, as did the philosophers stones Ebony and Crystal.

Sian stopped to look back at the sky behind them, towards the direction that Kreas had fled. His cries of pain for his loss still echoed in her heart. She bowed her head in sorrow.

Lucas put his hand on her shoulder, bringing her back to the present. Sian put her hand upon Venom's shoulder, and the group, all making contact with those nearest them, slipped into the magic cast out by Siren.

Everything went white for a moment, before turning clear again. They were standing in a meadow, with Indigo nearby, who had been waiting for them.

'So Reuben, you've been brought back from a dangerous situation yet again' Indigo drawled. 'Lucky you.'

Reuben touched the point of his chest where the injury had been. Now fully healed, there wasn't even a scar.

Indigo lifted his arm out before him, letting the dirt he held crumble between his fingers and fall back down to earth.

The meadow within which they stood was speckled with the colour of the wild flowers that grew. The tall

grass was swaying and rustling in the wind, and above them, a skylark sang a sad song, as if to help send those who had passed on their way.

The rolling hills around them grew into a small woodland that stood nearby, and beyond, resting upon the horizon towards the east, was a dark city.

Indigo stood at the end of the mound, a feeble cross made of the picket fence that stood nearby, still bearing the barbed wire that held it together, was placed at the head.

'I still don't understand this religion of yours' Indigo sighed. 'Jesus Christ. Why would a father kill his own son for the sake of others most of us don't even care about?'

'There are many religions in this world' Lucas explained. They are all so different, yet share the same core.'

Indigo threw the last of the dirt on the grave.

'It still doesn't make sense to me.'

'We have our own religion do we not?' Siren added beside him.

'Yeah, but we don't worship a man tied to a cross.'

'Don't be so insensitive' Siren glared.

Behind them Venom had finished tying the cross at the head of the second grave. He straightened, dusting his hands off.

'There' he sighed.

Sian gave a critical expression, but said nothing. She uncrossed her arms then, reverting her attention back to the philosopher's stones who stood close to one another, as if they were sisters who had known each other all their lives. They seemed drawn to one another.

'So' she said to them as she approached. 'You still have not told me who you are' she demanded, looking more at Ebony than Crystal.

Ebony averted her eyes uncertainly, Crystal remained impassive.

'You could start by telling me your name' Sian said to Ebony.

The others looked towards her at this point. Lucas was glaring, and Indigo watched Sian with sadness.

'Siren and I will be returning to the Ancient World' he said in a loud voice. 'And we will be taking the philosophers stones with us.'

At hearing this, Lucas began to feel an overwhelming sadness. A blanket of misery and despair was slowly suffocating him.

I don't understand' Lucas thought to himself. *What is happening? Why do I feel this way?*

And then Ebony said something that shocked them all.

'I don't what to go.'

'What?' Indigo rounded on her, gaping at her incredulous. 'Have you completely lost your mind?'

'I said' Ebony crossed her arms stubbornly. 'I don't want to go.'

'What's the matter with you? Are you under some spell?'

'I am under no spell' Ebony told Indigo. 'This decision is my own.'

'Why do you want to stay?' Siren asked her calmly.

Ebony lowered her eyes thoughtfully, as if thinking how best to answer.

'If Ebony is staying' Crystal voiced, 'then I am staying also.'

Indigo slapped himself in the face.

'I think' Siren spoke calmly, 'that we should talk privately.'

She beaconed the philosopher's stones to her, and as they approached, Lucas saw Siren grasp the air before her in an action that imitated holding an orb. But the orb was gone now, destroyed when the creature Li was killed.

Siren relaxed her hands, walking a distance away, enough so that a spoken conversation could not be heard. Indigo, once he recovered from his shock, went to join them.

Lucas watched them suspiciously, feeling nervous at the fact that the four kept glancing his way as they spoke. How he longed to know what they said.

'So who is she?' Sian asked. 'The one in black.'

Lucas turned his head to face her. 'She's just a girl.'

'But she isn't is she?'

Sian walked around Lucas, staring at him intently.

'I've seen the way you look at her.'

'What are you implying?' Lucas asked without patience.

Sian sniffed in distain, jerking her chin towards Ebony.

'Why does she have eyes like that?' she asked Lucas. 'Bright pink…it's so unnatural.'

'I don't know.'

'Is she a guardian like us?'

Lucas gave an anguished sigh.

'No' he droned. 'She is what's called a philosophers stone.'

'What's that?'

'I'm not entirely sure.'

They stood side by side, watching the elder guardians and the philosophers stones speak.

'It's strange how she doesn't want to leave' Sian said, referring to Ebony. 'So strange. Isn't it Lucas?'

Kreas threw himself to his knees, craning his head back and wailing in despair.

'Li!' he cried to the heavens. 'Li! My poor love. Dead!'

'Get a hold of yourself' the master snapped.

Kreas fell forwards on all fours, his head covered by his hood, his loose blonde hair hung around his face, hiding his grief.

'We must return to Lagoon' the master said. 'Get up.'

Kreas heaved himself back onto his feet, groaning at the pain that wracked his body. His injuries were substantial.

'Let me look at you' the master said.

Kreas crawled towards his master, hunching his body submissively. The master lifted Kreas' face in his hands, examining the wounds that covered his body. Many were visible, cuts and bruises, some could not be seen, internal damage inflicted by some spell. None of his injuries however were serious.

'You will be fine' the master said releasing him.

'We will go to Lagoon now?'

'Yes Kreas' the master answered.

They walked through the town at a leisurely pace, the master having to pause every so often for Kreas to catch up. There was an injury to his leg that caused him to limp, and he winced with every footstep.

'Try to keep up Kreas' the master told him as they went. 'You can rest when we get there.'

'Yes master' Kreas gasped, hobbling forwards. 'I'm coming.'

Their path led to a grand hotel near the centre of the town. The centre of the building was taller than the edges, and its windows were tall and narrow. At the front of the hotel there were two sets of glass revolving doors, and the lobby inside was large and luscious, made of purple carpet and marble seating.

'A fine place Lagoon has chosen to stay' the master noted, surveying the building before him.

'From one hotel to another' Kreas murmured humourlessly, fidgeting on the spot. 'Do you think we'll actually get them now?'

'The philosopher's stones?' the master smiled. 'Of course, we now know where they are. The hardest part is done.'

'But won't they escape to the Ancient World?'

'Don't worry' the master reassured, 'Lagoon will take care of that.'

The master made his way towards the building, crossing the road to reach it.

'Do you think it's safe to leave them alone now, what if they kill the girls themselves and take their powers before *we* can?'

'Hmm' the master thought, 'it is a possibility. But Lagoon assured us they would not do that.'

'Even the strongest minds can be swayed for power' Kreas argued.

'True' the master said moving through the revolving doors. 'And yet I still trust Lagoon's word. The elder guardians are strong minded, they will not be swayed by the power, though the thought is likely to have crossed their minds. And remember' the master added glancing back at Kreas, 'Lagoon knows them better than anyone, after all he used to be good friends with all of them. Indigo, Culture, even Shire and her daughter Siren.'

'Where has Shire gone then?' Kreas asked. 'Why has she left them?'

'Who knows?' the master shrugged carelessly. 'Whatever the reason, it shouldn't bother us.'

'That one dressed in black' Kreas asked, 'that's the sister isn't it?'

'That's right' the master replied. 'Lagoon killed her younger sister years before, he is still working off her magic.'

'It's amazing to know he's already found and captured one philosopher's stone, and yet he seeks more?'

'I know how rare they are, but the philosopher's stone he has now is weak, the girl was only young therefore……'

Kreas nodded glumly, struggling to keep up with his master as they moved through the hotel. 'Those below ten are not worth the trouble, isn't that right?'

'Yes. That's right.'

They reached the stairs which led to the upper levels; passing through the building they remained unseen to everyone within.

'Their powers mature as they get older' the master went on as they began to ascend 'like wine, it brews, or festers like an open wound.'

'What are the chances of him finding more than one?' Kreas mumbled.

'Next to impossible, this girl in black was a complete fluke. Even *he* didn't know about that one. And the girl in white, the one we were originally pursuing, she's older, and far more powerful.'

'Lagoon knows this?' Kreas asked tentatively.

'Oh yes. Like I said, Lagoon has already captured one philosopher's stone before and has gained much from it, despite the fact that it was weak in comparison to the ones we seek now.'

'But the others have both of them' Kreas reminded. 'Won't Lagoon be angry?'

'No, we haven't lost them yet; they are just being kept safe for us. Lagoon likely already knows what's happened, and he won't let them cross over to the Ancient World. We've already won this fight, the philosopher's stones have been found.'

'I just wish…Li was…'

'I know' the master nodded. 'She has done well. Now hurry, Lagoon is waiting.'

They left the stairs at the next level, heading down the corridor and towards the door at the end. The master paused before it; then reached out a hand to open the door. He entered the room within.

The room was large and spacious and very well lit. The windows on this level reached from ceiling to floor, with a view of the town around that was truly magnificent.

At first the room appeared empty, and Lagoon could not be seen, but as the master approached further into the room, with Kreas slinking behind, they saw him.

Lagoon was a man who was dark inside, a deep man who held many secrets. Even the master who followed his word absolutely didn't completely know or even trust him, though he claimed that he did. Lagoon was sitting quietly now in a comfy chair facing the large windows. Two seats were pulled up beside him, and on the coffee table before him were two tall glasses with a clear liquid in them.

Lagoon made no indication that he had noticed them at all; in fact he didn't even look at them as they approached. He just sat there, staring off into space, holding a white trumpet shaped flower close to his lips, breathing in the scent of the lily.

'Please, sit' he said at last to them, and the master and Kreas sat.

'Drink.'

The master leant forward and snatched up the glass, Kreas watched him take a sip before following suit. It had a sharp taste to it, leaving a burning feeling at the back of the throat.

'I wonder what it feels like' Lagoon whispered, speaking as if to himself, 'to know you're about to die?'

'I wouldn't know' the master replied.

'I wonder how that aberrant felt' Lagoon went on, 'that guardian, Culture. He knew he was about to die.' He gave a sideways glance to the master, his yellow eyes shining bright. His white wavy hair was streaked with light blue, and he had blue lines of paint under his eyes. He was dressed in blues, purples and blacks. 'Tell me Arran, what does it feel like to kill your own kind?'

The master looked up at him. 'I feel nothing.'

'How does it feel to hunt the philosopher's stone?' Lagoon asked him. 'It must be hard to overcome your instinct to protect them. I hope the task is not too difficult for you.'

'I manage.' The master replied shortly.

'I bet you're wondering how I plan to keep the philosopher's stones in this world' Lagoon said. 'Don't worry Kreas' he told him, 'that's safe to drink. I'd finish it if I were you, it will help you heal.'

Kreas bowed his head, tentatively taking another sip.

Lagoon smirked, revealing gleaming white teeth.

'I am playing with their hearts' Lagoon said to the master.

'Whose hearts?'

'The philosopher's stones.' Lagoon glanced at the master mischievously. 'They are emotional creatures. Their hearts are easily…manipulated.' He smiled again. 'This…Ebony. She will tell the others that she chooses to stay, and the other philosophers stone called Crystal, will stay to be with her.'

'Do you have the power to control the others?' Kreas dared ask.

'No' Lagoon replied. 'Only the philosopher's stones, once they are found that is.' He steepled his fingers, leaning back into his seat. 'There is nothing to worry about. Everything is going as it should be.' He closed his eyes in contentment. 'We can take our time now.'

Chapter Eleven

A Turn of Events

'You're more beautiful than the sun in the sky, more beautiful than the snow glistening on the trees in the cold heart of winter. Your smile lifts my soul and brightens my day, every second I spend with you just brings me so much joy……'

'Oh Adrian' Lauralie giggled, twisting her wrist as if swinging an invisible stick in her hand. 'You're so silly.'

He grabbed her by the shoulders with not too much force, in a non threatening grip.

'Please stop moving' he smiled patiently. 'Look.'

He produced a rose from the inside of his jacket, perfectly formed with each petal in place. One might have expected it to have been somewhat squashed. But no, it was as if he had plucked it fresh from where it grew, right out of thin air.

Lauralie blinked at it. The colour of the petals was red like blood.

'Another one?' she snatched it from his hand and twirled it around. 'Where on earth do you keep these?' she asked, frowning at it critically. 'If I didn't know

better, I'd say you were using *magic*.' The last word she pronounced deliberately as a slow drawl. 'I'd give it a four out of ten…I suppose. Hey, where do you think the others went?' Lauralie asked yet again, as if trying to change the subject. 'Reuben and Lucas and the others were with us…now they've vanished suddenly.'

Adrian somehow kept himself from slumping in exasperation and groaning in frustration.

I've never met a girl that was so hard to please he thought.

And then he noticed something.

Lauralie was looking over his shoulder, and as she did her eyes seemed to soften, and then she smiled.

Adrian glanced around. Behind him was Diz, sitting on a wall in the streets, he was playing absentmindedly with flowers that grew on the grass beside him. He seemed to be making a daisy chain.

Adrian could not resist making a sarcastic comment in his mind, though he kept his thoughts to himself.

Adrian took a deep sigh, resigned. 'He's a good guy you know' he said to Lauralie, sounding suddenly sincere. He called over to his brother, as Lauralie gave him a curious look.

'Hey Diz!'

'Yes brother?' Diz answered sweetly.

'I'm going home; I'll see you there later yeah?'

Diz raised his eyebrows in interest, and caught his brother's wink.

Adrian turned to Lauralie and gave her a forced smile, a smile that said many things. He gripped her

shoulder affectionately and walked past her in silence, regret in each step that took him further away from her.

That afternoon as things began to darken, found Diz and Lauralie alone in the town together, walking past the deserted shops. She was laughing like she had never laughed before, a gentle series of chuckles and girly giggles. And Diz in turn laughed with her, talking almost none stop, telling her jokes, what he did last week, his childhood, his plans for the future and the troubles he had gotten into with his brother.

'Oh Diz you're starting to sound like Lucas and Reuben, those brothers are always getting into trouble one way or another.'

He told her about what he did when he was five, how he and his brother first got into street dancing, that time he came home to a drunken Adrian and found a sock and pizza slice stapled to his bedroom door.

Lauralie listened to his stories, offering occasional silly comments and compliments. And despite the fact that she was much taller than him, she clung to him, hanging off his arm and making him walk diagonally.

And then Diz began to grow a little nervous, as did Lauralie.

They passed an alley, and something made Diz glance behind him.

Upon the wall of the dim alley, just visible in the failing light was a graffiti picture. A heart with an arrow running through it; inside were words…

Ask her out

Diz hesitated.

'What is it Diz?'

Lauralie made a move as if she was about to turn when Diz grabbed her arm lightly, the sudden move surprised her, and she looked back at him wide eyed. He grinned awkwardly back at her, unsure of what to say, wondering if whatever he could say would sound like a distraction.

'You're so beautiful' he breathed.

'Oh stop' she laughed, 'you're starting to sound like your brother.'

'S…sorry' he mumbled, he lowered his head as he let her go; hoping his second glance to the graffiti wouldn't draw her attention. 'I'm a little shy…can I ask you something?'

'You just did.'

He hesitated, wracked with sudden uncertainty and nervousness.

'Just kidding!' Lauralie squealed delightedly. 'Go right ahead, what is it you want to ask me?'

Diz gritted his teeth.

Wonderful, beautiful and funny, yet so annoying sometimes…no wonder my brother gave up on you.

Diz summoned his courage. He only needed a few seconds. Just one sentence.

Here it goes.

'I just….'

Just say it just say it just say it.

'I wanted to…..um…'

Lauralie tilted her head to the side, seeming to be only curious.

God she's so dam beautiful, I'm surprised she's not already with someone.

He took a deep breath.

Perhaps it's because everyone keeps chasing her….should I really do this?

'I really like you. I was just….I wanted to know if…..'

He looked up.

Can't chicken out now.

'Do you want to be my girlfriend?'

'Hu?'

Lauralie gave a slight gasp of surprise. 'Go out with you?'

She rubbed her chin, as if appearing to think about it, doing so for several seconds that were agonizing for Diz.

'Alright' she said at last beaming. 'In fact, if you wanted to know the truth; I've wanted you from the very first moment I laid eyes on you.'

'Really?' Diz said perking up, after letting out the deep breath he had been holding. 'Do you really mean it?'

She suddenly shoved him away in mock annoyance.

'What took you so long?!'

'Sorry!' he shot back automatically, feeling awash with relief. 'I didn't realise…'

'Oh you men' she huffed, 'so blind.'

She took him by the hand suddenly. Her skin was so soft and smooth.

'Let's go deeper into town.' She laced her fingers with his, grinning at his sudden shyness. 'You're so cute' she giggled. 'I always thought so.'

They left the scene. Lauralie skipping and dragging the shorter Diz with her, who struggled to keep up with her long legs.

From around the corner near the heart graffiti was Adrian, watching the two go. He grinned to himself, tossing the red spray paint into an open topped bin, as he set off on his way home.

Near the centre of the town, in the almost complete darkness were the new couple, wrapped up in each other's arms. Diz kissing Lauralie's lips tenderly.

'Oh Diz' Lauralie grinned slyly, though Diz could not see in the dark. 'You'll learn in time not to be so gentle.'

The sun was sinking further and further towards the hills, the sky was a sheet of changing colour, growing ever darker towards the horizon. The grey clouds were outlined in gold, and a chill was setting in. Ebony drew herself tighter, hunching her shoulders and crossing her arms.

'So what's your final decision?' Indigo asked impatiently.

'I have longed all my life to meet another one like me' Crystal spoke. 'I go, where Ebony goes, and if she chooses to stay,' she bowed her head, closing her eyes. 'Then I will also stay.'

'And you Ebony?' Indigo asked her. 'Do you still want to stay?'

'I do' she said.

'Why?' Indigo asked her.

Siren watched them quietly, glancing from one to the other. Crystal had also now fallen silent.

'Why?' Indigo repeated. 'Why do you want to stay here, when you know you will be hunted? You will be safer in the Ancient Worlds. Its where you belong.'

Ebony's attention diverted, drifting towards Lucas, the others followed her gaze.

'You want to stay' Indigo said incredulous, 'because of *him*.'

'He is the only one I have ever known to show me true kindness' Ebony replied.

'And for his *kindness*' Indigo spoke through gritted teeth, 'you would risk your own life, and his, *and* Crystals?'

Ebony shifted uncomfortably on the spot.

'What is the *matter* with you?' Indigo said, smacking her forehead with the back of his hand. 'It's like I'm talking to a cloud. Siren' he turned to her. 'You cannot surely support this.'

'Mother said we can't take her against her will' Siren replied.

'No' Indigo shot at her. 'She said we shouldn't, but…circumstances change…..' His lips curled a sneer at Ebony. 'There's something not right here. But I can't put my finger on what it is.'

He shook his head, turning from them. Indigo cast his hand out, opening the portal that was nearby, the portal to the Ancient World.

'Indigo what are you doing?' Siren asked him.

'Whatever will happen will happen' Crystal said, opening her hands as the mechanical dragonfly landed on her open palms. Her sentinel, the familiar she had named Cid. 'We may as well enjoy ourselves along the way.'

The portal shimmered behind Indigo, the gateway to the Ancient World. The path.

Indigo turned back to the three. He glanced from Crystal, to Siren, and finally Ebony.

'I will no longer play these games with you' he told her. 'We are leaving.'

'What?'

Indigo strode forwards, grabbing Ebony by the wrists.

She screamed. 'Let me go!'

At that exact moment, Adrian was returning home with mixed emotions. His heart was heavy, yet his feet light. He practically skipped along his way, slowing down as he reached the group of houses he was most familiar with. A place he had always known as safety and happiness. It was dark at this time, and he found it strange how none of the lights on his street were working when they would usually have all been lit. But he spared it little thought. Adrian slid through the gate at the bottom of his family's driveway, trying to be quiet, though the hinges still creaked.

Adrian also found it strange that all the lights were off inside his home. His parents would normally be

watching TV, and his sister would be in her room…..perhaps they were all on the other side of the house for some reason.

He marched up the steps and opened the front door to absolute silence.

'Dad?'

The curtains were all shut, and the moon above was hidden by clouds. It was totally dark inside the house, and Adrian could see nothing at all.

He took a step forward; there was a squelching under his foot as he did so.

The carpet was wet.

Adrian noticed movement to his side. The last thing he saw was a dark figure, swinging back a clawed fist.

'Well, I'd better go home now.'

'So soon?' Lauralie pouted, 'surely you can stay with me just a *little* longer.'

'Awww now don't make me feel guilty' Diz whined.

'Then why do you have to leave?'

'Because…wait, you're not going to make fun of me are you?'

'Of course not' Lauralie said defensively. 'Why would you say that?'

'Well….my mother worries. She knows I'm seventeen, but in her head I'm still her baby.'

'Naaawww that's so sweet.'

'Not when you have to put up with it.'

'Hold on a second, did you say you were seventeen?'

'Yeah?'

'Wow' she beamed, 'you're the same age as me. You look much younger though. I guess I should have checked your age before I agreed to go out with you. Don't want to be dating a minor now do we? I thought for a brief moment that I should ask your parent's permission…ha ha ha!'

She waved her hand, leaning back and laughing hysterically at her own joke.

'Awww' she sighed finally, wiping away a tear. 'I'm so silly.'

'Have you finished making fun of me?' Diz pouted.

'Hu?' she blinked at him. 'Oh don't take it like that, I was just teasing you.' She shook his arm lightly. 'Would it be ok if I walk home with you? I want to see where you live.'

'I see no problem with that.'

'Yey!' She leapt up, circling around him and clinging onto his arm once again. 'Come on then, lead the way.'

Lucas tensed at the sight of Indigo grabbing Ebony by the wrist.

He made to run forwards, to protect her. But Sian grabbed his arm to stop him; and he looked back at her. Even in the failing light Lucas could see her eyes, deep dark and beautiful, and full of so many emotions. One stood out more than the others.

Grief. She knew that she was losing him.

Lucas turned back to the elder guardians. He watched as Ebony was dragged away towards the portal that led to a new world, to places unknown.

Feeling helpless, he watched as Sian still held him. He was so close to losing Ebony forever, so close to never seeing her again.

His heart wrenched in his chest as Ebony screamed, he watched her trying and failing to pull away from Indigo as he dragged her. Crystal and Siren watched uncertainly. Neither of them intervened.

'Ebony!' Lucas cried, as his heart bled.

He saw her. There was terror in her eyes. She was afraid, afraid to leave his side; afraid that she would never see him again; as he was afraid for her.

'Lucas!'

Sian let go of his arm, acting so deliberately.

'She's calling for you Lucas' Sian told him. 'What are you going to do?'

Lucas stared back at Ebony, as she was dragged closer to the portal.

Indigo hesitated suddenly. He let go of Ebony, staring at the portal before him.

Siren faltered, giving a slight gasp and stepping back.

The portal before them flickered, once, then again, then died, fading away as if it had never been there.

'What the hell is going on?' Indigo demanded.

'It's Lagoon' Siren voiced.

Ebony moved sharply back towards Crystal, the two of them clung to each other, suddenly frightened. The dragonfly Cid darted back and forth above their heads.

A short distance away, Lucas let out a sigh of relief.

'That was lucky' Sian said flatly behind him.

There was a buzzing sound then, and Venom glanced about him, then towards Reuben who stood beside him.

'It's coming from your pocket' Venom said, as Reuben patted himself down.

Reuben pulled from the inside of his jacket the mobile. He answered the call.

'Hello?'

Lucas tilted his head, listening carefully.

'What?!' Reuben's eyes grew wide.

'What is it?' Lucas called to him, raising his voice so that he may be heard.

'Lauralie' Reuben said. '…she's….she needs our help…its Diz, his family are dead.'

'The others' Siren said to Indigo upon hearing this, her voice breaking in panic. 'Lagoon, Kreas and Arran. They've done this!'

Indigo snarled, baring his teeth in savagery. '*Where are they?*' he demanded.

'There's a group of houses at the edge of the town' Reuben called back.

Indigo marched towards Reuben and Venom, calling back to Siren to watch over the others as he did so. He grabbed both their wrists and the three vanished into thin air.

They approached the house.

It was quiet.

'Wow your neighbourhood is really deserted' Lauralie noted.

Diz took in the scenery around him, glancing nervously at the houses on either side.

'Why is it so dark here?' Lauralie asked. 'I can barely see where I'm going.'

'We're nearly there' he told her.

They reached the house on the end of the road. It was very dark and a little unsettling. Lauralie felt glad now that she had Diz with her.

Very little of the house could be seen, and there was nothing to light their way. The moon still hid behind the clouds and none of the streetlights were working. The unusual thing that both of them noticed right away, was that all the lights in the house were off. Indeed the house looked deserted, but more than anything else, the thing that was most alarming, was that the front door was left open.

It took a few seconds for them to take it in, though neither of them questioned it openly.

Diz tentatively approached the house, opening the front gate. It squeaked on its hinges.

Moving closer, Diz walked reluctantly up the short flight of steps towards the front door.

There was darkness in the room within, and nothing could be seen from where they stood.

'Diz?' Lauralie voiced uneasily pulling back, reluctant to go any further.

Diz stood at the threshold of the open door; still he could see nothing inside. There was not a single light on, and all the curtains had all been shut.

The place seemed deserted, and there was not a single sound, besides the rasping noise of Diz's own panicking breath. Diz tried his best to control himself. He held his breath, lifting his hand towards the wall.

He switched on the lights.

What he saw would change him forever. No longer would he be known as a friendly happy go lucky boy who smiled at everything. Now….

Diz laid his eyes on the scene before him.

His parents, both he had known well and loved dearly, lay dead. His father, a stocky man with shorter greying hair lay facedown, his mother slim and young with a stab wound to the heart lay on her back. They appeared to have been trying to escape.

His sister, was collapsed sideways on the sofa, throat slashed. And his brother. His dear beloved brother lay before his feet. The slash laid upon him was fatal and would have killed him in seconds. It ran from his collarbone diagonally up to his jaw and severing his throat.

There was blood everywhere, almost too much. The carpet was moist, soaked in red and shining in the light.

He exhaled, letting out all the breath in his body, feeling he could not take another, feeling his lungs turn to lead and his heart to stone.

The beating stopped, the shock of it.

His stomach lifted in fright, and a sudden sense of unreality dawned on him.

He shook his head, gasping wordlessly.

No. This isn't real.…

This isn't real!

He backed away, shaking his head. He lost his footing and fell backwards down the steps.

'Diz! What is it?'

He rolled over and heaved, throwing up the entire content of his stomach as Lauralie ran forwards. She stopped just short of him, glancing into the room within the house and gasped, clapping her hands over her mouth, she began to tremble violently, eyes watering.

'Oh god…'

She pulled out her mobile and furiously began to dial, fingers fumbling on the buttons.

It took her several attempts to get the number right.

When Reuben came finally, he found them at the foot of the steps. Sobbing hysterically was Lauralie, holding Diz in her arms; the two were on the floor, backs to the home.

Lauralie looked up as Reuben, Venom and the elder guardian Indigo approached. Reuben paced towards them panicked, behind him Venom shared his fear, and Indigo tailing after them remained controlled and expressionless.

Reuben's heart raced as he lay eyes upon them. 'What's happened?'

'He hasn't said a word' Lauralie whimpered as they drew closer.

Diz had shed not a tear; frozen in a state of shock, he had simply fallen completely silent.

Indigo walked past them and towards the front door. 'Stay back' he told the others, 'and don't look.'

Obeying his word without question, Reuben remained standing where he was, as Venom knelt, putting his arm around Lauralie and sitting between her and the house.

Indigo reached the threshold.

He stood there for a moment, before switching the light off, and closing the door.

Chapter Twelve

The Elusive One

'Where's he taken them?' Lucas demanded.

'I don't know' Siren replied calmly.

'But he could hurt them.'

'No' Siren shook her head. 'He would never do that. He is trustworthy.'

'Not from what I saw' Lucas argued back, glancing at Ebony, remembering the way Indigo had dragged her against her will towards the portal.

She had been so close to it. Lucas feared for an instant that he would lose her forever.

'We can trust him' Siren repeated sternly. Clearly she was absolutely convinced of the words she spoke.

'We have to find him' Sian cut in.

'I think I know where he is' Crystal spoke up. All eyes turned to her.

'Where?' Lucas demanded.

'I can feel Indigo's magic hanging in the air, though it's fading fast.' Crystal took a deep breath as she tried to feel the spell around her. 'I do not have the magic to take us there, I am too weak. I've used too much of my power fleeing from my hunters.'

'I can take us there' Siren offered.

Crystal nodded, 'I can guide you. I have power enough for that at least.' She raised her arms. 'We must hold hands.'

She took Sian's and Siren's hand as they stood either side of her. Sian took Lucas', and Siren took Ebony's. Lucas lifted his hands towards Ebony for her to take. She hesitated for a moment, oblivious to Sian's cold hard stare boring into her.

'It's ok' Lucas whispered to her, quietly so that only she would hear.

A smile flickered within her, and she reached towards Lucas, taking his hand. Lucas could feel her palms were sweating, and her arm was shaking slightly as he held her.

She was afraid.

'Are we ready?' Siren asked the others, summoning the magic within her to transport them to that place.

Crystal took another deep breath, brow furrowed in concentration as she used what little magic she had left. She guided their path, as Siren summoned her magic to take them all away.

'I fear we are too late' Siren mumbled, as they stepped onto the tarmac of this new place they had arrived at.

Around them were many houses where many people slept, oblivious to anything that was out of the ordinary.

The five let go of each other, approaching with caution one of the houses, where Indigo, Reuben and Venom could be seen standing in the garden before the home.

Siren stopped just short of the pavement, reluctant to proceed further.

'Crystal, Ebony' she said to them. 'Stay behind me, I'll protect you.'

The two philosopher's stones obeyed quietly, sticking close to one another. Crystal lifted her arm around Ebony's shoulders, bowing her head at the tragic scene before her, with sadness in her heart.

Sian and Lucas moved forwards. Indigo lifted his head towards them as they approached the scene. He wiped the sweat from his brow as they stopped before him. Lucas glanced past him and towards Lauralie, who was crying and holding Diz in her arms as they sat on the steps before the home. Diz seemed to be in shock. His bright blue eyes were wide in fear.

'What's happened?' Lucas whispered.

Moments later, Lauralie and Diz were ushered away from the door. Sian lifted her hands, using the magic she had inherited from the aberrant Culture, who now slept forever. Great streams of fire she descended upon the house, engulfing the entire building and setting it ablaze. The fire swiftly took hold; soon it became a roaring inferno, consuming everything within.

'Come on' Indigo prompted, 'we'd better make ourselves scarce before others turn up to put out the flames.'

'It would be too late by then anyway' Sian sighed.

The light from the fire cast tall shadows of each of their profiles upon the ground.

'This place is tainted with an evil touch' Siren hissed.

'They died in the fire' Indigo told her. 'Nothing more.'

Crystal was saying a prayer before the house, head bowed, eyes closed and hands together.

Her breathe came out as fast inaudible mutterings. Sian lifted her hands a final time, the power of her magic grew, and the air around them became hotter as the fire blazed brightly. Reuben and Venom both lifting their hands to shield themselves as their skin began to burn in the heat, even from the distance they stood.

'Crystal' Indigo called to her.

She raised her head to his voice.

'Come away now.'

Crystal followed at his command, and the group moved away from the roaring inferno that had taken the building now firmly in its grasp.

'Where shall we go?' Ebony asked the others as they gathered on the road between the other houses.

'My brother' Sian realised in a raised voice. 'I left him, what must have been hours ago.' She glanced to Reuben. 'I grabbed the back of your shirt as you vanished into magic; after we watched Lauralie and the brothers' dance' she explained. 'I left Kyle behind; it feels like so long ago now. So much has happened since.'

Beside her Lauralie stood with her arm around Diz. Still he had not said a word.

'Is this our fate, for Crystal and me if we are caught?' Ebony voiced suddenly, glancing towards the

house where the bodies of four innocent people lay to rest.

Indigo turned his back on the fire, facing Crystal and Ebony.

'It is' he said, giving a slow and steady nod. 'If we do not get you to safety soon.'

In the dark, sirens began to sound, alarming the world around them to this terrible disaster.

'Quickly' Indigo hastened, 'we must leave.'

'I want to go back to where we were before' Sian told him quickly. 'I need to find my brother.'

Indigo nodded. He and Siren joined hands, indicating the others to do the same.

The strange group disappeared from view, just as the fire engines were pulling up.

They found Kyle where he had been left. He had waited for his sister to return for hours, and when she finally did, he was less than impressed by her disappearance.

'Where the hell have you been?' he demanded of her.

'Oh Kyle I'm so sorry' Sian exclaimed. 'The most shocking thing has happened. I've changed.'

'Such things cannot be seen by none-magical folk' Indigo butted in unhelpfully from beside her. He was unheard by Kyle of course, and unseen. 'Nor can they be understood' Indigo went on. 'So save your breath.'

The group drifted away from Sian and Kyle as they began to argue.

The two philosopher's stones, Crystal and Ebony sat on a bench together with Siren. Indigo who remained standing, watched the others as they took seats on different benches in the area.

'You should not have gotten involved in all of this' Indigo snapped after a time.

Lucas glanced up at him from his seat beside his brother. 'What?'

Indigo cast his eyes over Lauralie and Diz, sitting together on their own. Lauralie was still holing Diz, who was silent as ever.

'The life of a guardian is filled with war and suffering' Indigo went on. 'You should have stayed and lived your normal life like everyone else around you.'

'Lived a normal life?' Lucas echoed.

'How can we live a normal life being what we are?' Reuben argued. 'How can we live as others do?'

'You should have stayed away from Ebony, from both the philosophers stones.'

'No' Lucas said rising, anger boiling within him. 'Even if I knew what she was, how could I abandon her to her fate?'

Indigo snarled, turning away from him and muttering. 'You should not have gotten involved.'

He walked away from them, coming to a stand on the edge of the pool of light created by the street lights above them. He stood with his back to them, visible only as a silhouette.

'You may be right' Siren spoke up, loud enough so that Indigo could hear her. 'But it does not change the fact that either way, it would not have stopped Lagoon from blocking the portals.'

Indigo only gave the slightest indication that he had heard. A slight tilt of the head. He didn't speak, but his shoulders were slumped, and he appeared to relax somewhat.

'I'm sorry' Siren said to Lucas. 'He gets carried away sometimes. Mother always said he was too emotional.'

'Can I ask you something?' Venom spoke up.

Siren nodded to him.

'What's Lagoon?'

'Not what' Siren replied to Venom. 'Who?'

'Who is he?'

'He is another guardian' Siren explained. 'He is the reason we've been working to tirelessly in tracking down the philosopher's stones. Though Crystal succeeded in eluding us, we followed her trail from town to city to forest and back to town again. For many months we searched.'

'How did you know about Crystal in the first place?' Reuben asked.

'It started only as a rumour' Siren replied vaguely. 'Soon Lagoon found out, and then the race began. A very slow winded, tedious and boring race. Who would find her first? We were only lucky.'

'So those people….' Reuben said, 'the ones that hurt Drake…'

'They work for Lagoon' Siren nodded.

'And what happened at the house?' Venom asked tentatively.

'Probably Lagoon's order' Siren replied. 'It's unlikely he did it himself, it's not really his character.'

'You know him?' Lucas said in surprise, straightening up.

'Know is not quite the right word' Siren said shaking her head. 'Let's just say he is notorious in our world for causing trouble. He has already found one philosophers stone. It has given him much power.'

'How?' Venom asked slowly.

'It was his turn back then to be lucky' Siren replied. 'But we think that stone was weak, perhaps very young. It has not given him that much power, but enough to hinder us. Very few guardians have the ability to block a portal. But he has. As we have seen.'

'So he is trapping you all here' Venom said.

'Or so it would seem.' Siren shifted uncomfortably on the bench. 'The philosopher's stones are not safe until we reach the Ancient World. But we can't do that if Lagoon is blocking the portals.'

'So….' Lucas spoke slowly.

'We must kill him' Siren finished.

Lucas' face remained impassive.

'I'm guessing that you've tried' Reuben offered.

Siren hunched her shoulders, becoming irritated.

'The last stone he obtained has made him powerful. But not powerful enough. He is strong enough to kill many guardians with ease, but not yet strong enough to be a threat to the king and his lands in the Ancient World. That is why this is so vitally important. The stones can give you new powers and strength…and unthinkable….limitless…' She sighed, glancing towards the philosopher's stones beside her as she slouched back on the bench. 'Crystal and Ebony, between them they would have an extraordinary amount of power. If he

caught them….' she shook her head. 'I would hate to think of what might happen.'

'You know a lot about philosophers stones then?' Venom asked Siren.

'A bit. They are powerful beings, but cannot use their own magic to their full extent. It can only be used by someone else after….'

'They have been killed' Ebony finished, staring vacantly away from the others. 'What will happen to us if we follow you to the Ancient World?'

'You will be protected' Siren replied. 'By the king.'

'Forever?' Ebony asked.

Siren gave her a curious look, but didn't answer. Perhaps she understood Ebony's doubts.

Crystal on the end of the bench sat utterly still and relaxed as if in meditation, holding the dragonfly Cid gently in her hands. She gave no indication that she heard anything of what the others said at all. She appeared to be in a world of her own.

All this suffering…and it's all for my sake. If I allow them to catch me, perhaps I could save Ebony, perhaps they will forget about her…

Crystal subtly peered towards the others out of the corner of her eye. More than the rest, she noticed Diz, silenced by the shock of losing his entire family so violently, the sight of their bodies…

Perhaps I could slip away Crystal thought. *Perhaps I can end this suffering and grief by myself…before anyone else gets hurt on my account.*

It was sometime later that Lauralie left Diz's side, perhaps to be alone with her thoughts. Siren gave her a moment before joining her. Behind them Kyle and Sian had ceased their conflict, now resting on a bench like the others, in silence.

Siren came to stand by Lauralie, who had detached herself from the others.

'Are you alright?'

Lauralie managed a flickering smile that quickly faded.

'Better than….' She trailed off.

'It must have been awful what you saw.'

'Is this…' Lauralie asked tentatively, 'what's it's all about then? The life of a guardian?'

Siren's pained expression told the whole story.

'Those who fight' Siren explained in a gentle tone, 'see many things. We are soldiers of the king, we are guardians. We protect.'

'Would you change who you are if you could…..would you change the past?'

'Nobody can change the past.'

'Would you try' Lauralie asked, 'can some things be undone?'

Siren didn't answer. Instead she changed the subject to Diz.

'How is he?' she said glancing towards him.

Lauralie took a long while to answer. 'He still hasn't said a word.'

'It is' Siren said, thinking carefully of the words she should use, 'not unknown for one to have seen something terrible to fall silent.'

'What do you mean?'

'He may not speak for a while. It may even be months….but…in time….'

'Will he ever be the same?' Lauralie asked in a pleading tone, as if Siren could have done something to help.

'I don't know' Siren replied, her heart wrenching in her chest at the pain in Lauralie's voice. 'I wish I could do something, I really do.'

'I don't know what I could do to help' Lauralie whined. 'I haven't really known him for that long; I don't know what would make him happy. I don't know….but I really love him.'

'He needs you now' Siren told her. 'More than ever.'

Lauralie nodded slowly in understanding. She took a deep breath. 'You don't just give up when things get tough' she said huskily, voice breaking.

'I know' Siren mumbled.

'Let's hang in there…..let's…let's hang in there' Lauralie said to herself.

'Time…' Siren told her, 'heals all wounds. Time' she said. 'Just give him time.'

Sometime later, Lauralie tried again to make him speak.

'Diz?'

Lauralie tenderly lifted his chin, forcing his eyes upwards.

'Please say something' she whispered in agony. 'Please…'

Diz stared silently back. His face a carved statue, his expression showing none of the grief he surely must be feeling.

'Diz…' she pleaded, 'why won't you speak?'

'He's in shock' Indigo explained behind her, chewing on a stick of wood. 'I wouldn't worry too much. He'll talk when he's ready.'

'When?' Venom demanded, talking for the first time in a long while.

Indigo lowered the stick irritably. 'Do I look like I know?' he shot back.

'Sian' Lucas said suddenly.

She raised an eyebrow to him.

'You've inherited Culture's power. That aberrant. He healed me once, when I was injured. You yourself healed Reuben when he was on the verge of death…and Venom too. Perhaps there is something you can do for Diz?'

She lifted her chin at him, answering shortly.

'I can't.'

Lucas looked taken aback.

'What? Why?'

'I can only heal physical injuries' Sian answered. 'Diz's injuries are psychological, I cannot help him.'

'But you have magic' Lucas protested.

'So do you' she countered with a glare, daring him to continue.

Lucas bit his tongue before it got him into trouble.

'What do we do now?' Venom asked Indigo.

'The only way we can get back into the Ancient World is if Lagoon is killed' the elder guardian replied. 'After that, the others will be of little threat to us. With only Arran and his creature……they cannot hurt us.'

'And then' Reuben said looking towards them, 'you will take the philosophers stones to the Ancient

World, and leave our lives fore…' he hesitated. 'Where did Crystal go?'

Indigo whipped around suddenly at these words, wide eyes and staring at the spot she had been sitting beside Ebony not moments before. Even Ebony seemed shocked to see that Crystal wasn't there.

'God…DAMMIT! Indigo cried in fury, lashing out and striking the nearest lamp post in despair and rage.

'She wants to be found by the others' Siren realised, speaking aloud. 'Well…she always was good at hiding.'

The dragonfly Cid flew above them then. Its buzzing wings loud in the silent night.

'She's putting a spell on us' Indigo groaned, fighting in vain against the sudden exhaustion that threatened to overwhelm him. Magic was descending upon them all, cast by the mechanical Cid.

Lucas stumbled, grabbing hold of the nearby bench for support. His eyelids drooped, and his mind began to fog, wavering already on unconsciousness. Very briefly he glimpsed his brother, collapsed asleep on the floor, and Lauralie beside him, easily recognised by her ginger hair. As he fell to his knees, he saw Siren and Indigo fall also, and then Venom.

His body slowly relaxed.

The last thing he experienced as he lay down, was the cold stone slabs of the street, touching and chilling his body. And then he felt nothing.

The next morning

'You'll be ok won't you?'

'For the hundredth time' Drake laughed to his girlfriend. 'I'll be fine.'

'I know I know' Eleanor fussed. 'I just worry about you sometimes.'

Drake stroked her cheek gently with his one hand. 'I promise I'll come and visit soon' he told her. 'But you had better go now, or else the train will leave without you.'

'That wouldn't be so bad' she teased. 'Then I could spend more time with you.'

'Eleanor' he frowned in mock irritation.

'Alright' she chuckled.

Eleanor stood on her tip toes as she planted a kiss on his cheek.

'You'll come visit soon won't you?' she asked him.

'Definitely.'

She grabbed her bag and pranced off towards the train.

Drake waved at her from the platform as she found a window seat from which she could see him, and she waved back enthusiastically, blowing him kisses until the train slowly began to depart. The train picked up speed, running faster and faster along its tracks.

Drake watched her go as she waved to him. He sighed, sad to see her leave, then turned and walked away.

The next Lucas knew was waking up feeling extreme cold.

He groaned, pushing his body off the ground and rubbing his cheek and shoulder where he had been lying uncomfortably on the solid concrete. It wasn't fully light yet, and the sun still had not left the horizon, but even at this hour the streets were beginning to come alive. Many people passing by stopped to stare at the young guardians picking themselves off the floor, groaning in discomfort as they woke one by one.

Lucas looked around blearily, blinking several times to clear his vision as he drew a shuddering breath between his teeth, holding himself tightly. The cold had seeped through him to his very bones.

'Have we really been here all night?' he grumbled to himself.

He then noticed a figure standing very close by him, watching him blankly. As Lucas' vision began to focus, he noticed the figure was missing an arm.

'Drake?' Lucas mumbled, lifting his hand to shield his eyes from the light that shone through the clouds in the pale sky.

Drake stepped closer so that Lucas could see him better.

'I was just on my way home from the train station' he explained. 'And I saw you guys all lying here.'

Behind them the others were beginning to rise. Lauralie crawled over to Diz to help him up. Kyle was staring around him in confusion, uncertain as to what had happened and why he was on the floor. And Indigo, suddenly wide awake and jittery, let out a cry of frustration, balling his fists and throwing his head back.

'What's wrong with *him*?' Drake asked calmly.

'Oh Drake' Lucas said shaking his head. 'I don't even know where to begin.'

Strange creatures began to appear all around them, of every size and shape. Lucas recognised them as aberrant, drawn to Ebony by some unknown will. They slowly began to approach her, wary however of the other guardians.

'Are we safe here?' Drake whispered, nervously backing away from a beast that passed inches from him.

'Don't be afraid' Ebony called to the others as she dusted herself off. 'They will not hurt you.'

'Lucas watch out!' Reuben shouted.

Lucas' his heart stopping in his chest at the sight of the aberrant that stood behind him. A tall exaggerated beast, with a thin body and a long tube-like mouth. It narrowed its eyes at Lucas, towering over him and hissing.

'It's ok' Ebony reassured him. 'They are safe.'

'That's the same beast that nearly took my life' Lucas spoke calmly back at her, staring up at the aberrant as it remained immobile where it stood.

'He was probably just scared' Ebony comforted. 'These creatures are not bad, only misunderstood.'

The aberrant moved closer to Lucas then, making a strange noise as if smelling him.

Lucas lifted a hand tentatively. He reached forwards, fingers outstretched. He touched the aberrant at the base of its tube mouth, the creature jerked back slightly as if startled. Its skin was extremely hot to the touch.

'You see' Ebony beamed. 'They're not bad at all.'

'Come away Lucas' Reuben said to him mistrustfully.

The aberrant drew away from Lucas sharply, suddenly hissing; clearly now it was agitated. It stalked past him, drawing closer to Ebony and standing near her, as if simply waiting.

'We have to do something' Indigo said to the others, now having calmed himself.

'But what can we do?' Siren asked him. 'I have lost my orb fighting the creature Li, I can no longer see Crystal, and you'll be hard pressed finding a philosopher's stone that does want to be found.'

'You think I don't know that?' Indigo shot back, smacking a hand to his forehead in frustration. 'But we must do *something*. Or else Lagoon…' he trailed off, hand slipping from his forehead as he lapsed back into thought.

'She's really that important then?' Sian asked.

'You have no idea' Siren raised an eyebrow at her.

'Then she must be found' Sian said.

'I can find her' Ebony mumbled.

'What?' Indigo broke from his trance then. 'What did you say?'

'I said I can find her' Ebony repeated, this time louder.

'How?'

Ebony threw her arms out, indicating all that was around them. 'Aberrants' she said.

'I don't follow.'

'You brought the aberrant Culture with you to help you search' Ebony went on. 'These aberrants are drawn to her. She is stronger than me after all, more

power, more magic. They are more attracted to her than they are to me. I could locate Crystal using *them*.'

'How?' Indigo repeated.

'By my demand.' Ebony examined her surroundings, as if searching for something. 'Ah' she said when she had found it.

She leant forwards, opening her hands out as one of the aberrants crawled closer to her.

'The aberrants fled when Crystal was attacked' Ebony said. 'She must have sent them away to protect them.'

Ebony placed her hands lovingly under the chin of the beast that had approached her. A scrawny thing with a short face, large teeth and great black wings folded beneath its black body.

'I can control them' Ebony whispered, 'as *she* can. I can send them to her, so that she may be found.' Ebony tilted her head towards Lucas and Reuben. 'Are you ready to fly?'

'Yes' Lucas said quickly, overriding Reuben as he opened his mouth to speak.

'But Lucas' Reuben spluttered. 'Are you sure you want to do this? You could get hurt. You remember how powerful the elder guardians we fought were?'

'Don't you see?' Lucas said turning to him. 'We finally have a purpose now. Don't you remember when we were kids how often we wondered *why*? Now we know. This is what we are meant for, as guardians. To protect.'

'Spoken like a true guardian' Indigo nodded slowly with pride. 'I feel that you will grow to become something great.'

'So this aberrant will lead us to Crystal?' Reuben asked Ebony doubtfully.

'It will' she nodded.

'Then what are we waiting for?' Lucas asked.

'We don't have wings like you do' Indigo told him. 'We will have to catch you up.'

'Fine.'

'And who else will come?' Indigo raised his voice, speaking to the others.

'I must stay with my brother' Sian said. 'I've got a lot of explaining to do. I owe him that much.'

'He will not understand' Indigo glared impatiently.

'I must try nonetheless.'

Indigo shrugged.

'I will go' Venom said, stepping forwards. 'I want a taste of what it's like to be a guardian…this new life.'

'You will get it' Indigo told him in warning. 'Have no doubt about that. Lauralie, Sian, Drake,' he said facing them in turn. 'Can I trust you to watch over Ebony while we are gone?'

'I'm not getting involved' Drake said flatly. 'I want nothing to do with this life.'

'We will watch over her' Lauralie breathed, glancing towards Ebony and forcing herself to smile. 'We'll um…wait here.'

'You'd better go quickly' Ebony said. 'There's not a lot of time.' She ran her hand over the aberrant's forehead that stood before her, sending her wishes into its mind.

The winged creature backed away, turning and beginning to run. Gaining speed and quickly rising in the air.

'Hurry' Ebony told the brothers.

Simultaneously the brothers called forth their wings, magnificent dark bronze wings, almost identical to one another.

They leapt to the sky, Ebony gasping in wonder as she watched them go, swiftly followed by the other winged creatures. The aberrants without wings remaining on the ground ran in the direction the brothers flew, the direction Crystal was. Indigo and Siren unprompted ran in the same direction, following the beasts as Venom followed after them.

Ebony remained, with Lauralie, and the ever quiet Diz. Sian kept close to her brother, and Drake stood separate from the group, watching Ebony and conveying no emotion whatsoever. Ebony noticed his missing arm, and wondered with sadness what he must be feeling.

'Please' Ebony whispered to the sky. 'Come back safely…Lucas…'

It was out on the balcony of the hotel that Lagoon was sitting and drinking. The iced whisky half full sloshed around in the cut glass that he held. He swirled the ice around again.

It was quiet in the room behind him. Arran and Kreas had gone. Lagoon found himself wondering if they would both return alive.

He took a sip of the sharp whisky, and spoke to himself.

'There are many threats out there……many guardians….much magic…….we will get them in the end. It's only a matter of time.'

It was then, as if in answer to his words, that he saw the most curious thing.

It was a sort of mechanical dragonfly, with jewelled eyes of emerald green and fast beating glasslike wings. It was beautiful.

'What is this?'

It darted towards him, though Lagoon sensed it was no threat.

He held out his hand instinctively, and the dragonfly landed on his palm. A vision shot through his mind. A girl in a white dress running through the town towards him; she had long white hair and her eyes were grey.

It was her.

The dragonfly jumped off his hand then, darting through the air and into the room behind him. Lagoon rose from his seat, and followed the mechanical device through the room, towards the stairs and up, reaching the highest floor and going further. The dragonfly led him to a door that opened out onto the roof.

Outside it was very cold, and the wind was strong this high up.

Standing on the edge of the rooftop, facing away, was Crystal.

'Calmly, and without fear. Do you know what fate meets you my dear?'

Crystal turned slowly to face him. The dragonfly darted about above their heads.

'Tell me. Why do you choose to give up now after all this time?'

'I came here willingly' Crystal told him, 'so that no others would come to harm.'

'Such a gentle soul' Lagoon cooed. 'So caring.'

'I wish for no more pain' Crystal said. 'No more suffering.'

'Then you shall have it' Lagoon replied. 'I shall harm the others no more.'

Lagoon reached for his belt, and drew forth a gun. Very slowly, he began to load it.

Crystal took a deep and steady breath as she watched him.

'There are other guardians on their way here' Lagoon told her. 'They wish to save you.'

He finished loading the gun, lifting his chin up high and observing her.

'Two of them will be here soon. They are young…let me think…' he closed his bright yellow eyes, brow furrowed in concentration. 'I can feel them' he whispered. 'Brothers. With wings.' He sneered.

'Please don't hurt them' Crystal begged him. 'They only wish to protect me.'

'My dear' Lagoon reassured her. 'It is only you that I want.' He bowed his head. 'Here they come.'

The brothers landed either side of Crystal, facing this new stranger with defiance.

'I find it strange' Lagoon voiced before either of them had a chance to speak, 'that you would put yourself in harm's way to protect her.'

It was only a short time later that the other guardians arrived, Indigo, Siren and Venom. And all around

them, aberrants began to appear. They flocked in the sky, blocking out the sun in all their mass, and on the rooftop they gathered in number. Some followed after the guardians through the building, and others climbing up the outside of the building itself.

Lagoon shrugged when they had all appeared, sighing and showing his hands.

'I guess that is all of you then.' He ran his fingers through his blue streaked white hair. 'Even with all of you' he told them. 'You could not stop me.'

'Powerful, but not invincible' Indigo replied.

'Oh Indigo. We used to be such good friends once.' He sighed in reminiscence of that time long ago. 'I may not be invincible' Lagoon gleamed, showing white teeth, 'but I'm near enough.'

And then he did something that surprised everyone. He threw the gun to Siren.

'Here' he said to her. 'Shoot me.'

She raised the weapon slowly, holding the gun with both hands. Her arms began to shake violently, as she slowly turned the barrel of the gun towards her own head.

'*No!*' Crystal screamed.

Lagoon gave her a mischievous look, putting a finger to his lips and turning back to Siren to watch. Indigo who had jumped forwards to strike Lagoon had stopped suddenly, he too was trembling violently now. His shoulders were quivering as he reached inside his robes, pulling out his sword and turning it on himself.

'One more to go' Lagoon sang with pleasure, turning towards Venom. 'Oh.' He looked disappointed.

'You have no weapons on you. How sad.' He flashed his perfect teeth again. 'No matter. We can improvise.'

One of the abarrants nearby turned on him, grabbing Venom from behind and immobilizing him.

'You can control aberrants?' Venom gasped, as he was held down by a fiery beast with massive horns.

'I can do many things' Lagoon rejoiced.

He threw his hands up towards the sky, and as one, all the flying beasts scattered as fast as they could, heading in every direction away from them. Those without wings also fled, escaping the rooftop by any means necessary, and howling as if in pain. The only aberrant that remained, was the one holding Venom down.

'There' Lagoon said with pleasure. 'That's better.' His look turned sour then. 'I could kill you *all* if I wanted. It would only take but a mere thought.'

His attention moved towards the brothers.

'Do *you* want to try anything funny?'

Reuben glanced towards Lucas, but he looked defeated, as if he realised this was too much for them to handle. Now he only looked on.

Lagoon smirked. 'I didn't think so.'

He pulled a second gun from his person, pointed, and shot.

The bullet hit her in the centre of the chest.

She fell, disappearing over the edge of the building.

The magic forcing Siren and Indigo to turn the weapons onto themselves ceased, and the aberrant released Venom. But by the time they looked up, Lagoon was gone, along with the philosophers stone Crystal.

Chapter Thirteen

Last Breath

Lucas could hear nothing but the blood pumping in his ears, the adrenaline coursing through his body. He thought of Ebony, as he turned and glanced behind him, to the drop where Crystal had fallen seconds before.

But she was nowhere to be seen. And when Lucas faced ahead again, Lagoon too was gone.

Indigo was losing his mind. He had fallen to his knees, laughing hysterically in panic and despair.

'Did you see that?!' he cried. 'Even with all of us we're no match!'

'Indigo' Siren screamed shaking him violently. 'Get a hold of yourself!'

Venom calmly turned to the aberrant that stood behind him, hissing at it. The beast snarled back, then turn-tailed and ran, as fast as it could away and to places unknown.

Lucas took a step back towards the edge.

'Lucas?'

He fell, as Crystal had done. Spreading his wings and soaring away, ignoring his brother as he called after him.

'Lucas!'

Only one thought rested in Lucas' mind. One fear; and that was for Ebony.

They would surely be coming for her next. He had to reach her before they did.

He found Ebony, with Lauralie, Diz, Sian and Kyle. Drake was nowhere to be seen.

The moment he landed, Ebony ran to him and embraced him.

'Lucas!' she cried, sobbing into his shoulder. 'Crystal is dead!'

'I know' he replied calmly.

She looked up at him. Her large bright pink eyes so beautiful and so sad began to shimmer.

'I felt her fear' Ebony whispered. 'She was so afraid…'

'Ebony' he told her grasping her firmly by the shoulders. 'I have to get you out of here. We have to escape.'

'Oh Lucas…' tears began to roll down her cheeks. She could no longer hold them back. 'There is nowhere I can run now that they won't follow' Ebony cried. 'I cannot leave this town! I am trapped here because of the magic all the elder guardians put here in order to trap *her*.'

'I have to try' Lucas pleaded. Unconsciously in his desperation he dug his nails deeper into her shoulder, but she did not flinch.

'But you'll put yourself in danger.'

'I don't care' Lucas shot back defiantly. 'I just can't….I can't…' He gritted his teeth, eyes beginning to shine.

Ebony raised her hands towards him, lifting his chin up.

She stood on her tip toes to reach him, kissing him deeply. Lucas in his shock did not resist.

He knotted his fingers around her body, spreading his wings.

Rising upwards, he flew away with her.

Back on the ground, Sian uncrossed her arms.

Taking a slow and steady breath, she silently turned and strode away.

'Lucas' Ebony begged, as she squirmed in his arms. 'Lucas put me down.'

'I have to get you out of here' he said back to her, holding her tightly so that she would not fall.

'I can't' she whined. 'I can't leave the town. Please put me down.'

Lucas began to drop closer to the ground, tilting his wings to slow their descent. However, completely unknown to him, his path was being followed by a creature on foot.

Lucas landed in a quiet alley and let go of Ebony.

'You're so strong' she said to him, 'I wish I was like you.'

'I'm not strong' Lucas answered with remorse. 'I am weak, so weak. I failed to protect my brother in the past. I failed to protect Crystal. I failed even to protect you.'

Lucas cast his mind back, thinking of Lagoon.

'That man who killed Crystal. He was so powerful. He was able to stand against all of us, with only the slightest effort.' His eyes glazed over then as he thought of Lagoon and his incredible power. 'I want to be like that someday. I want to be powerful like him. If I were, then maybe I could have done something.'

Ebony lifted her hand, touching the side of his face tenderly.

'It's not your fault that I am trapped here Lucas. It's the fault of those that hunt me.'

'We could try to escape this town' Lucas urged.

'I can't' Ebony shook her head. 'I cannot cross the net that surrounds this town. It would hurt me. I am afraid, that if I do somehow manage to cross it, it would kill me.' She lifted her head up towards the heavens. 'It is there' she whispered, 'directly above us, right before my eyes. I can see it.'

'I see nothing' Lucas said glancing up.

Ebony bowed her head.

'I just wanted to…' she drew a deep breath, struggling to speak now, as if her throat was tightening. 'I just wanted to thank you' she said at last, meeting his gaze. 'For everything you have done for me.' She bit her lip, so hard that it began to bleed. 'Thank you' she whispered with a smile. 'No matter what happens from now on, I want you to know that I regret nothing.' She

faced him directly now, standing tall. Suddenly she was not afraid.

'I love you Lucas.'

His heart stopped in his chest, and he stood there before her utterly still.

Ebony stared back at him, her unnatural bright pink eyes so different to the ones he had first known.

Before he could speak, Lucas noticed movement over Ebony's shoulder. A tall beast with sleek black fur lunged at him from the shadows of a narrow alley beside them. Lucas pushed Ebony aside and Kreas barrelled into him, knocking him over. Lucas fought desperately with the beast atop of him. Claws and teeth and wings were flailing everywhere. Lucas' right wing flew up and was caught in the mouth of the beast. Lucas screamed in pain as the beast Kreas locked his jaws, biting down and jerking and twisting back and forth. Agonising seconds later, his wing detached, torn off at the joint. Kreas scuttled back, holding the broken piece of the wing in his jaw and cackling hysterically. Transforming into his human self he raised the wing triumphantly in both hands above his head.

'This is for you Li!' he howled. 'This is for you!'

Lucas fell back, staring up at the sky as the clouds passed gracefully overhead, oblivious to the pain and suffering that was happening below them. Wreathed in sweat, Lucas was shaking and weak. Gasping in shock he tried to sit up, propping himself up on an elbow. Ebony was over him in an instant, kneeling next to him. She was beside herself, screaming and crying over his injury.

They had not but the briefest of moments together, when Ebony's head snapped back and something shot past Lucas.

His breath caught in his throat, unsure for a moment of what had just happened.

And then he looked down.

A lance like weapon protruded from Ebony's chest and ran mere inches away from Lucas' shoulder and cheek. It was stuck in the ground, embedded in the tarmac behind him.

'Ebony!'

Ebony gasped for breath, blood spurted from the hole in her chest as the lance was pulled sharply back out of her. She fell forwards onto Lucas. He felt her dead weight upon him as he held her there with one arm, still propped up on the other.

'Lucas' she pleaded, her voice was weak and fading. She began to shiver, 'I'm so cold….'

'Please' he begged, 'please don't go…please don't die!' As he spoke the words he felt disgusted at himself for resorting to begging, for sounding so weak. '*Please*…'

Her body sagged, and she closed her bright pink eyes for the last time. A shining light grew from her body; engulf her whole torso and growing brighter.

Lucas squinted, turning his head away when he could no longer tolerate the brightness of the light as it became unbearably strong. The weight of her body lifted from his chest, and when the light retreated, Ebony was gone.

Upon his chest where she had lay, was a stone. It was startling pink in colour with cut edges, and large enough to sit in the palm of a hand.

Ebony was gone. This was all that was left of her.

A hand reached down, and picked up the stone.

The master walked away from him calmly as if nothing had happened, his heavy boots thudding on the tarmac.

He walked past Kreas, still holding the severed part of the wing, and towards Lagoon who waited at the end of the alley.

'You monster!' Lucas screamed in despair, rising to his feet.

The master dropped the stone into Lagoon's open hand, turning and standing beside him. Lagoon's face was calm and emotionless.

'To kill innocent people….how could you take away the lives of those who cannot defend themselves? *All for the sake of power*!? For your own selfish reasons.'

'Power' Lagoon replied smoothly, 'is possibility.'

Kreas began to cackle again. His voice continued on and on until it bore into Lucas skull, but still he did not stop.

Lucas snapped.

All the torment and grief and anger came crashing down on him. A dam whose wall had finally been breached, the power it had been holding back now unleashed its fury.

He screamed in rage, charging forwards and leaping upon Kreas he grabbed his face, digging his nails into his skin and baring his teeth in savagery. Kreas fell backwards onto the tarmac, laughing and repeating the

name of the woman he had loved over and over, as Lucas smashed his skull again and again against the concrete.

Neither the master nor Lagoon reacted, not until after Kreas was dead, and Lucas was gasping and shaking from anger. Flecks of blood dotted his face as he sat back, glaring with hatred and loathing at Lagoon.

'Power changes people' Lagoon told Lucas as he sat upon the dead body of Kreas. 'You never know. One day….you could be like me.'

'I will *never* be like you' Lucas snarled. Pure hatred and venom filling his soul; he felt only revulsion and disgust.

'Ebony would have come to love you in time' Lagoon informed him solemnly, 'had I not played with her heart.'

'What?' Lucas gasped, taken aback. His emotions let go of the hate, and swiftly turned to heartache and uncertainty.

But Lagoon would not elaborate further. He walked away, ignoring Lucas as he called after him. The master followed Lagoon, and the two vanished.

Lucas had never cried so much before in his life. Disgusted at himself at what he had done, and suffering from the trauma of losing Ebony so violently, he began to slip into shock. Tears streamed from his eyes he covered his face, as if wanting to hide from the world. To hide from its cruelties and torment. Where was the

justice, where were those that were supposed to protect the weak, the vulnerable, the innocent?

Reuben found him sometime later. Lucas remembered him calling out his name, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him.

But Lucas did not respond.

Chapter Fourteen

New World

The days that followed were long and drawn out and empty. The sudden absence of the philosopher's stones left a gaping hole in the lives of the young guardians, and the elder guardians, the two of which had remained, were gone.

Having followed the philosopher's stones and the young guardians so closely and without rest for so many days, their absence, like the absence of the philosopher's stones, left a void.

After Ebony's death, Sian and her brother Kyle had gone away, returning to their own home in the town nearby, and Lucas became withdrawn. Like Diz who had suffered greatly, Lucas chose to spend most of his days now alone. He spoke little, and like Lauralie with Diz, Reuben found himself helpless, and unable to do anything to make him better.

Reuben spent most of his days of late wandering alone. Sometimes he would wander to the abandoned

hotel on the edge of the town in the industrial estate, and remember the way things used to be. Lucas had warned him in the past that it was dangerous to go there alone, but after everything that had happened, Reuben doubted that there was much in this world that could frighten him. Not now.

He spent hours a day just sitting there inside the hotel, moving from one room to another. He would think of Drake, before his injury, before the day they had become friends with Venom, who had once been known as Jacob, and remember the days that they had had together. The day they had broken Drake out of collage and come to this place to practice their magic, trying their best to hide from Lauralie as she constantly sought them out. Back in the day before Lauralie had known the street dancing brothers, back in the day before Adrian and his family were killed, before Diz went silent. Back in the day when Drake was truly himself.

It seemed that Drake could not let go of what had happened to him. He left the town shortly after Ebony was killed, and moved to live with his girlfriend Eleanor, in the town next door, making Reuben feel even more that he was alone. Drake barely made contact with Reuben now. Venom too, had stayed away.

On one occasion, when Reuben was sitting in the old hotel, slumped against the wall, his mobile began to vibrate.

He pulled it out of his pocket, and answered it.

'I just needed someone to talk to.'

Reuben observed Sian closely. She would not look at him directly, but stared away towards the horizon from the harbour on which they stood.

'Things have been so strange lately' she continued, speaking to Reuben. 'I don't know what to feel anymore.'

She sighed, her shoulders sagged and she faced him at last.

'How is Lucas doing?'

'Not good' Reuben answered. 'I barely see him nowadays. He's become withdrawn; he barely speaks to me, and shuts himself away most of the time.'

'That's awful.'

Reuben nodded mournfully, trying not to show how much it hurt.

'He must have really cared about her' Sian went on.

'I guess he must have done' Reuben shrugged. 'I don't know when things changed.'

'I don't know where things went wrong' Sian corrected. She closed her eyes, tears falling quickly down her cheeks as she cried silently. 'He meant so much to me, but….I guess…it just wasn't meant to be.'

'Hey' Reuben smiled, moving closer to her and touching her shoulders.

She lifted her head up to him.

'Don't be sad' he told her confidently. 'Things will get better.'

'I hope they do' she whispered to him, her throat tight as he held her.

He smiled at her again, slowly and with warmth.

Sian lifted her hands between them, sending up before them a glowing pillar of light that sparkled and shone.

'It's so easy' she told him. 'Don't you think?'

'It is.'

'Have you been a guardian for long?'

'Yes' Reuben nodded. 'Lucas and I both.'

'He never told me.'

'He thought it best not to. He didn't know how he would have explained it.'

'Well now he doesn't have to.' She closed her hands together. 'I've been practicing my magic for a few days' she told him. 'There is a lot that I can do.'

She turned from him then, dancing her hands through the air and weaving over and over again great shapes of fire all around them.

'It's comes so naturally to me.'

'It does' Reuben agreed. 'Magic has been a part of me for so long now, I can't even imagine life without it.'

'I've noticed suddenly' Sian began changing the subject and casting her attention all around them, 'that since that day, I have not seen a single aberrant. Not one. I've not even heard a whisper, or any hint that they are still nearby.' She paused. 'I find that so strange.'

Reuben lifted his head, realising this for the first time. And he felt even more alone somehow.

'I feel there are still some things I can learn' Sian went on, glancing back at Reuben. 'Can you teach me?'

'Yes' he breathed, returning his attention to her. 'I can.'

She moved closer to him, leaning into him and wrapping her arms around him, resting her head against his chest.

'I want us to be friends' she told him. 'So much has happened lately, and I'm so confused about everything. I need someone, another guardian, to help me cope. Someone that I can talk to.'

'I understand.'

Sian backed away from him.

'I should be going now. Will I see you again soon?'

'Whenever you want' Reuben said. 'I will always be here.'

'Good.' She made to turn away, hesitating for a moment. 'Tell Lucas…' she fell silent in thought. 'Tell him…that I still care about him, and I that want him to be happy, no matter what happens. Can you tell him that?'

'I will.'

Sian marched away without a backwards glance.

Sometime later, Reuben returned home.

Lauralie knocked on the door hesitantly, and waited nervously for a response.

She fidgeted on the spot, tucking her hair behind her ears and rubbing her sweating palms against her jeans. Several agonising seconds later, the door was opened by an old lady.

'H-hello' Lauralie stammered.

'What do you want?' the old lady croaked.

'Is Diz there?' Lauralie asked hastily, before her nerves failed her.

'And who are you?' the hunched grey lady demanded.

'I'm his…friend' she finished shortly.

The old lady narrowed her eyes; then snapped the door shut.

Lauralie was taken aback, unsure of if the door would open again. She contemplated leaving for a moment, but then the door opened again, and Diz stood before her.

'Diz!' she cried, resisting the urge to jump up and down, so joyous was she to see him.

'You know this girl?' the old lady asked from behind Diz.

He gave a half glance back at her, nodding silently. He stepped outside, closing the door behind him.

'Oh Diz' Lauralie realised. 'Your hair. It's turning white.'

She could see from where she stood, white roots were growing through Diz's light brown hair, and his blonde highlights she had loved so much were no longer visible.

'So' Lauralie went on, when Diz stared blankly at her, saying nothing. 'You're staying with your grandparents.'

He gave a nod.

'Your grandmother seems nice.'

He tilted his head at her.

'Diz' Lauralie began, bowing her head. 'Listen. I just had to come to see you. I couldn't stay away. I've

been so worried about you. I wanted to see how you are.'

He didn't answer, only stared at her, with his light blue eyes piercing into her.

'Diz' she went on. '…I love you….with all my heart, with all my soul, my very being.' She drew a shuddered breath. A tear trickled down her cheek, but she ignored it. 'I feel like I was put on this earth to love you, if you left, my world would crumple, please, stay with me, it's hard I know, but let's keep at it. I know things will get better.'

Diz still said nothing. He had not smiled since that day, not even to her.

'I know you're sad right now' Lauralie went on, 'I know you miss your family, and your brother…I miss him too. But….things will get better, I'll be here for you, if there's anything you need.'

She reached towards him, and stroked his hair back lovingly, then drew away, sighing.

'I wish none of this had ever happened' she stammered. 'I'm sorry' she said turning away. 'I've got to go.'

She ran from the house, no longer able to face him. No longer able to compose herself.

A short time later she ran into two of her friends, Christina and Alice.

'Lauralie what's the matter?' Christina asked in shock.

'Nothing' she sobbed, wiping the tears from her eyes.

'This doesn't look like nothing' Alice scolded, taking a pack of tissues from her bag and handing it to her.

'Thank you' Lauralie whimpered sadly.

'I've never seen you so sad' Christina told her. 'Something terrible must have happened.'

'Oh' Lauralie cried. 'I wish I could tell you. I wish you could understand.'

'We understand you' her friends argued together.

'Why would you think any different?' Alice frowned sternly.

'You've become so distanced from all of us lately' Christina told her.

'Ever since you first saw the street dancing brothers' Alice realised. 'Is this about them?'

Lauralie could not hold it back anymore. She burst into tears, bawling and crying hysterically. Her friends utterly bewildered tried desperately to comfort her.

But she was inconsolable.

It was dark inside the apartment when Reuben returned. Although it was broad daylight outside, all the curtains in the living room where shut, and not a single ray of light was allowed to enter the apartment.

Reuben closed the door behind him, and cast his sights down upon Lucas as he lay on the sofa. He had been here like this for several days now, almost in the same position. He rose only when he absolutely had to. He had barely eaten, and hadn't drunk a single thing besides alcohol for longer than was healthy. Bottles now

littered the floor around him, and day by day as the hours wore on, Lucas was becoming sicker for it.

'DON'T!' Lucas cried suddenly in a panicked voice, alarming Reuben as he made his way towards the window, intending to open the curtains.

Reuben turned back to him silently.

'I don't want to see the light' Lucas whispered. 'It hurts my eyes.'

'What's happened to you?' Reuben asked. 'I've never seen you like this before.'

'……Regret…' Lucas mumbled, sitting back. 'I feel…' he croaked, his voice sounding as a rasp. 'Regret…' he finished. 'Ebony said that she loved me. I feel regret….that I did not tell her…that I loved her…'

'Surely she would have known' Reuben answered.

'The elder guardian…one of the ones that hunted her….he said that he played with her heart…that he made her love me.'

'And can you believe the word of such a man?'

Lucas didn't answer. He only stared vacantly upwards at the ceiling with a glazed expression. His black hair was greasy and unwashed, draped over his forehead and over his eyes.

'I don't know what to think anymore' Lucas told the room.

Reuben stayed a moment longer, unsure of what to do.

He moved back towards the front door, slipping through it and closing it after him, leaving Lucas to his grief and sorrow.

Reuben took his mobile from his pocket, and dialled a number.

'Reuben?' came Venom's worried voice on the other end of the line. 'What is it? Is everything alright?'

'Yeah everything's fine' Reuben answered quickly. 'Listen, I need a favour to ask. Can I stay with you for a few days? Lucas isn't doing well.'

'Sure' Venom replied. 'I'll meet you in town.'

'Thanks.'

It was many days later, that Lauralie was sitting alone in the park. With her knees up on the bench, she watched the large fountain before her raining water down in the pool below. The weeping willow above her swayed gently back and forth; the people walked by her along the gravel paths.

Lauralie sighed miserably. She reached into her pocket, pulling out a handful of seeds and throwing them at the ground for the hungry starlings and pigeons.

The birds picked eagerly for the seeds, fighting amongst each other. They scattered suddenly, and Lauralie looked up in surprise to see a figure approach her.

He stepped through the flock as they began to take wing, sitting beside her.

'Diz?' Lauralie asked tentatively.

He did not answer, but watched, as the birds returned to the ground to feed on the seeds once more.

Then, he reached into his own pocket, throwing out more seeds for them to eat.

A minute or so passed.

Once all the seeds he carried were gone, Diz reached into his other pocket. He brought out a single boiled sweet, and handed it to Lauralie.

Lauralie took it from him, and saw that is was orange like her hair.

The edges of her eyes crinkled in a smile, and she glanced up at him. Diz was looking back at her now.

He blinked several times, lips curling in a slight smile. Lauralie shuffled up to him, closing the gap on the bench between them. She didn't say anything, but leant into him, resting her head on his shoulder and holding him close, like she used to.

Reuben and Venom were wandering through the town together. They had been for the last few days trying to pick up the remnants of their old lives when they came across a figure that they did not expect. A person they thought they would never see again.

It was Siren, she was sitting on a wall, in a spot that suggested she had been waiting for them.

Reuben and Venom faltered at the sight of her, and Siren lifted her head towards them.

'Hello.'

'What are you doing here?' Reuben asked her. 'I thought the portals to the other world would be open now.'

'They are' Siren replied simply. 'I have been to the Ancient World, and come back.'

'Why?' Venom asked.

'I was looking for Indigo' Siren admitted. 'He is missing. I wanted to find one of you, to ask if you had seen him.'

The two exchanged a glance uncertainly.

'I've not see him' Venom said.

'Nor me' Reuben added.

'Oh' Siren sighed, 'I see.'

'I'm sure he's fine' Venom said dismissively. 'He is a guardian after all.'

'It's strange' Siren said, talking to her hands. 'The truth is…he never left this world, at least not as far as I understand. He said that he would be following me to the Ancient World shortly, but he never came, and I haven't seen him since. I was getting worried.'

'Where do you suppose he's gone?' Reuben asked her.

'I don't know.'

'You don't suppose the other elder guardians have anything to do with his disappearance do you?' Reuben asked her tentatively.

'You mean Lagoon? The one who began the hunt for the philosophers stones? No. I have a feeling that he left of his own free will.'

'What will happen now that he has them?' Venom asked, referring to Lagoon.

'I'd hate the think' Siren muttered under her breath. 'I'm sure we will find out…in days to come.'

'So who exactly is this Lagoon?' Venom asked her. 'And why does he want the stones so badly?'

'I know it's hard to believe' Siren began, 'but he used to be a good friend of ours, years ago. He was once Shire's lover.'

'Your mother?' Reuben raised an eyebrow.

'Yes' Siren nodded. 'But thankfully he's not my father.' She paused. 'Lagoon. It was the name he adopted once he became a guardian. He hasn't been a guardian for that long, yet his ambitions have become great.' She played absentmindedly with her blue hair as she spoke, twirling it between her fingers. 'He was even good to me…back in the day. But one day my mother left him. She didn't like the way he thought, the way he always sought power. Since that day he's been our enemy, seeking, always seeking more power, with his brilliant mind.'

'That's why he won't fight' Venom realised. 'Why he doesn't want to face you, why he always sent those creatures to do his bidding.'

'A theory shared by Indigo' Siren shrugged. 'He claims it was Lagoon's broken heart that turned him into the monster he's become. But we will never know for sure.'

'So why did you come back here?' Venom asked her. 'It can't just be to ask us where Indigo is. Why did you come all this way?'

'You're a smart one' she teased, tapping the end of her nose. 'The truth is' she spoke, sliding off the wall, 'I wanted to show you something.' She moved away from them, indicating for them to follow. 'Come with me' she said, 'and I will give you possibility.'

Lucas opened the curtains, seeing a glowing golden sunrise outside and beyond. The sky was gloriously

bright like a honey glaze, and for the briefest of moments, Lucas felt a trickle of his old self, returning to him. A memory came to him.

'Lucas. You're up early.'

Lucas spotted Ebony behind him. She was dressed in her typical blacks, winking at him with her hazel eyes. Sitting upon her shoulder, was Pokie, glaring at him as usual.

'Reuben's not up yet' Lucas told her.

'Oh?' she said teasingly.

A sly smirk crossed his face. He strode up to her, taking her in his arms and kissing her deeply.

She broke away from him, giggling shyly and hunching her shoulders, cheeks blushing.

'Oh Lucas' she said touching her fingertips to her mouth. 'You're so daring. Are you sure your brother doesn't know?'

'If he did, he would have said so by now' Lucas reassured her.

She giggled again, poking the end of his nose, before kissing him again. He winced suddenly as she touched his waist.

'Sorry!' she worried. 'Does it still hurt?'

'A little' Lucas smiled awkwardly, placing a gentle hand on his own waist where the bandage still was. 'The aberrant did a good job, but he didn't have enough magic to fully heal me. It's still a little tender.'

'I'm sorry' she said again.

'Don't worry about it' Lucas said relaxing.

She beamed at him. 'I'm so glad we met. How did I ever go so lucky?'

She pulled him towards her, walking backwards. She stumbled suddenly, her wrist jerked backwards as something caught her, tying her arm to the leg of the coffee table.

'What's this?' she exclaimed.

It looked like a piece of scrap metal sitting on the floor, shaped like a burnt piece of paper that had curled and scrunched up in a fire. From it came many thin wires that bound her in place to the coffee table.

'Sorry' Lucas fumbled, quickly rushing to untie her. 'It must have dropped out my pocket. I haven't had a chance to properly test it yet.'

'You carry those things around with you?' she asked sceptically, straightening up and rubbing her wrist where it had caught her. She watched as Lucas returned the device to his pocket.

'Hey' he waved a finger at her. 'You never know when you might need them.'

Lucas' expression turned serious then.

'Reuben's coming.'

Ebony gasped, she hurried to pick up a magazine, seating herself in a recline position on the sofa, as if she'd been there for ages, Pokie sat on her lap. Lucas wandered over towards the kitchen, and began to cook breakfast, just as Reuben entered the room.

'Morning' Ebony said casually without looking up, flicking through the magazine.

Lucas returned to the living room, holding a pan of eggs he was about to cook. 'How does your arm feel today?' he asked his brother.

Reuben lifted his cast that went up past his elbow. 'It feels good' Reuben said. 'Hopefully I can have it off soon.'

Ebony and Lucas shot a sly glance to each other; Reuben was completely oblivious to anything going on.

Lucas' mobile began to buzz then, and Lucas read the text. It was from Sian.

When are you coming to see me?

Lucas began to text a response.

I told you, we're finished. What does it have to take for you to get this?

The response came quickly.

I don't belive you. Your upto something

Lucas heaved a sigh, closing the mobile and putting it back into his pocket.

'Lucas?' Ebony's voice was uncertain. 'Is everything alright?'

'Everything's fine' he told her. 'There's nothing to worry about.'

Lucas watched the golden sunrise, opening the curtains further as a thought slowly dawned on him.

'Ebony would have come to love you in time, had I not played with her heart.'

'He was lying' Lucas spoke aloud, remembering Lagoon's last words to him. 'You didn't know of her by that time.'

He realised suddenly that he was alone in the apartment, realised that he had not seen Reuben for many days now.

Lucas opened the window, calling forth his wings, intending to search for him by air. He felt out of

balance suddenly. Glancing over his shoulder, he remembered why.

His right wing, now only a stump at the joint had healed well. But he would not be able to fly again, not like this. Lucas felt sadness as he realised this.

His wings withdrew into his back, and Lucas headed for the door instead.

He would have to find his brother on foot.

Far away, in the neighbouring town, was a man, or to be more precise, a guardian. Walking with purpose, he strode beside the rails at the edge of the harbour. The wind whipped his black rooted, fiery red hair, and he scanned his surroundings with his pea-green eyes.

In the great river beside him, small ferries channelled people from one side of the river to the other, and the old navy ships with their huge masts rocked gently in the rippling waters.

Indigo passed a statue of an old man leaning forwards on a rope, ringing a bell that was on top of the rope. Sitting at the foot of the statue upon its steps, was a young man with one arm. Drake watched as Indigo marched on, sparing him only a brief glance. Drake did not care why he was there; he had left that life of violence behind. He ignored him, speaking again to his girlfriend Eleanor who sat by his side, trying to forget the trauma of his past.

He would never go back.

Indigo kept searching, until he found what he was looking for, a young man, by the name of Kyle.

'I have come to know you. I have been watching you for a while now, and I have chosen you.'

'Chosen me?' Kyle responded, seeing Indigo for the first time. 'Chosen me for what?'

'You're a fighter' Indigo continued, 'you're strong…never mind' he waved away. 'I will give you a choice. Do you want to discover a whole new world of possibility and power, and to be just like your sister? Do you want to become strong, and do great things? And if you say yes to me now, remember your life will be changed forever. You can never go back.'

Kyle didn't even hesitate. His answer came quickly, and with surety.

'Yes' he told Indigo. 'I want to change. I want to become better than what I am. I want to go where my sister goes. I care for her very much.'

A slow gleam passed over Indigo, and he felt elated, bowing his head at the young man.

'You are so much like your sister' he told him. 'I know I am making the right choice. 'One day, you will travel to the Ancient World, and inherit my name.'

Indigo touched Kyle at the chest.

Kyle felt a shooting sensation through his body, like an electric shock, then a great pain. And then, a sudden feeling of power and liberation, as his body felt strong, felt truly alive like it never had before.

'Goodbye Kyle' Indigo said slipping away from him. 'We will not meet again.'

Indigo would leave his old life he had lived in the Ancient World behind him. He would spend the rest of

his days travelling in the Modern World, as a normal man. Siren nor anyone else would ever know what had happened to him. His disappearance would remain a mystery forever. He could not go back to the way things had been, not ever. He could not forgive himself, nor get rid of the guilt. The guilt he felt every day, for failing to save both Crystal and Ebony. He felt no longer worthy to call himself a guardian, and so, he called himself Vagrant.

'What is this?' Venom asked.

'A doorway' Siren cast her hands out towards the portal before her, 'to the Ancient World. It's open for you. You only have to step through. Let me lead you to places unknown.'

'Are we really ready for this?' Reuben voiced his concerns. 'I couldn't leave my brother behind.'

'You don't have you' came another voice.

Siren, Venom and Reuben glanced around, seeing Lucas standing there. In the days he had been away, his black hair had grown longer, and now hung across and face and over his forehead, shading his blue eyes.

'Lucas?' his brother asked. 'How did you find us?'

'Lucky guess' he shrugged.

Lucas observed the open portal before them, its white light shining brightly, even in the midday sun.

'I want to leave this place' Lucas said, 'and travel to places new. I want to explore other worlds, just like I dreamed of when I was young.'

'Just like *we* dreamed of' Reuben corrected, moving to stand beside his brother. 'There's nothing left for us here' he continued. 'Perhaps it's time for both of us to move on.'

'I will meet you on the other side then' Siren beamed at them, before stepping through the portal herself.

Venom followed swiftly after. Reuben and Lucas held back.

'Are you alright?' Reuben asked his brother. 'You seem….different.'

'So do you' Lucas retorted. 'So much has happened to us lately. It's impossible for it not to have changed us.'

'What's that you've got there?' Reuben asked, as he noticed his brother pat something in his pocket.

Lucas first was careful to make sure that nobody in the streets were paying attention to him, he then reached for the item, bringing it out for his brother to see.

It was a jagged stone, shining brightly in the sunlight, a shade of pretty pink.

'What's that?' Reuben asked.

'It's a philosopher's stone' Lucas answered. 'The last memory I have of Ebony.'

'What? But how? I thought the elder guardians took both of them?'

'So did I' Lucas agreed. 'I don't understand it myself. I think perhaps Ebony performed a spell before she died. That she created another. The one they took is a fake.'

'How do you know?' Reuben asked.

Lucas shrugged.

'I just know' he said. 'This is the real one.'

The brothers stood side by side before the portal. A dragonfly darted above their heads as they prepared to step through.

'Are you ready?' Lucas asked his brother teasingly.

'Are you?' Reuben joked back.

Lucas smirked at him, and side by side, they crossed the threshold.

Lucas was blinded by the white light, then everything went dark, and his stomach lurched. He felt the sensation of being on a rollercoaster, travelling faster and faster. His stomach was so tight that it became almost unbearable. His eyes watered, and he saw white flashes shooting past him that might have been stars. But soon enough his feet touched ground again, and he stumbled forwards.

Lucas gathered himself, straightening up. He opened his eyes and gasped.

They were in a place completely new, no longer surrounded by concrete and bricks. Around them now were huge open plains of grassland. Large sections of woodlands grew in the distance, and even further away were giant mountains that towered over the rest of this world. The air felt fresh and clean, and Lucas smelt the scent of sea air nearby, noticing at the same time that

the sun was in a different position in the sky, noticing also that it was warmer here.

Before them, built against the coastline on the edge of the grasslands, was a great city made of stone. From where they stood, Lucas could see many turrets and towers of varying shape and height lifting from the buildings, and dotted here and there were banners and flags.

Reuben cried out in surprise beside him. Glancing over to him, Lucas could see Reuben staring at his hands in bewilderment. Great markings had appeared on his flesh, tribal markings that covered the back of his hands and were growing slowly up his forearms. Lucas lifted his own hands, to see that the same was happening to him.

'Your full powers have been brought alive' Siren replied calmly, 'by coming here. This is a magical world, unlike the one you've come from.'

Venom stared in amazement at the transformation, suddenly voicing a thought.

'What about Lauralie and the others?'

'The others are free to follow you' Siren said to him, 'when they're ready.'

Lucas sensed something then. Closing his eyes tight shut he saw a brief but vivid image flash through his mind.

Another world. A third world.

It was cold, the grass was frosted and the clouds were dark. There were no birds here, and the rivers and the seas were frozen. And somewhere off in the distance, set at the base of a rocky cliff, was a temple of pure white.

Lucas grimaced, his brow creased as he felt a great presence from within the temple itself, a presence that reached out to him.

'Father….?'

Epilogue

Many years later in the Ancient World

People were screaming, fleeing in a blind panic from the soldiers who were sparing no-one. The city was in complete chaos, the cries of the dead and dying were too much to bear; some of the soldiers even took their own lives out of despair of what was being done. Women and children lay dead in the streets along with the men, young and old.

No-one was spared.

The man tripped and stumbled forwards as an explosion went off near him, falling hard he cut his chin badly as debris rained down on him. Turning over he fumbled to push the remains of the broken house off him. The wall had collapsed, and the wooden beams that once held up the rooms had fallen on him, and it took him a great effort to break free again.

There was a whirring in his ears, his head was swimming and his hearing was as if he was underwater. The sound of murder was deafening to only a serious of echoing moans and slices in his head. Blood now paved the streets.

The man froze as he was caught in someone's eyes. The body of the child not yet reached ten lay splayed on

the ground near his mother. Eyes open yet unseeing, and wide, as if he knew the man was there. But he was dead.

The man panicked, his fear rising again. He crawled up the mountain of the crumbled house, debris and dust falling from his clothes like snow.

He reached a courtyard. The scene of his death.

'Here he is! We've got another one!'

The man spun round. The soldiers were all heavily armoured and wore helmets so that nobody could see their faces, the faces of the men who had done all these terrible things, following only their commands.

They began to advance on him, drawing closer together as they did in a half-circle, backing him against the wall. The man quickly searched himself, and drew out a broken knife, the blade he remembered had snapped earlier in a fight.

He gave a choked sob, throwing the thing to the ground. Dripping with sweat, he was beaten, bruised, bloodied, and now he was cornered too.

'That's it!' he cried, voice breaking, lifting his hands to show himself defenceless. 'You've won!'

One of the soldiers moved nearer with his sword raised.

'I did not think the king would resort to such measures…' the man whispered to himself.

He took an item out of his pocket, now it was the only thing he carried.

The stone, small enough to fit in the palm of his hand, was completely clear like glass. Once it had been bright pink.

'The magic…has failed me…'

The soldier swung his weapon. The man, completely defenceless crumpled, falling forwards and bleeding out. The stone fell from his hand and skidded across the floor, it shattered into many tiny pieces under the foot of one of the soldiers as they surrounded him.

Sword arms now relaxed they loomed over him like ghosts, watching him die. The man's fingers twitched; and he stared up at the philosophers stone, shattered and swimming in his own seeping blood.

It took him seconds to die.

He changed form suddenly, from the man he was impersonating and to the man he truly was. His hair turned white, streaked with blue, and his eyes returned to their original shining colour of yellow.

'Lagoon' one of the soldiers spoke, 'we've got you…at last.'

'Call off the attack' the General ordered, 'inform the soldiers that we have him.'

'It's too late sir' a third soldier answered. 'The city is gone, there must be only a handful of people left, they will be dead soon.'

The soldiers bowed their head to the dead guardian at their feet, never removing their helmets.

'Lagoon' the General spoke. 'You have caused enough death and destruction in your life. Today was your final act. No more will you live to harm.'

'Flight? What's wrong?'

The guardian sat at the table, holding his furrowed brow in both hands.

'The voices' he groaned. 'I can hear them screaming….souls….many people are dying.'

The guardian Indigo, once known as Kyle approached him, placing a hand on Flight's shoulder. 'There is nothing you can do to help them.'

'I feel my time is coming soon' the guardian Flight answered lifting his head. 'I feel I am not long for this world.'

Flight brushed his blue hair out of his face, and fiddled with his blue feather earring. Something he always did when he worried.

'Come friend' Indigo said to him. 'We have work to do.'

Flight rose from his seat, lifting the sword from the table and pushing it into his belt. He walked with Indigo out of the room.

In the third world

'Lucas stop this! You are not yourself.'

'It's mine' Lucas shot back. 'I *will* have it for myself.'

Reuben didn't answer; he simply looked past the end of the sword at his brother.

'Don't do this.'

Lucas lowered the sword; he twirled it once and stuck it in the holder on his back.

'Do not try to follow me, if you pursue this…'

'Are you going to hurt me…?' Reuben asked tentatively.

Lucas shot a glare back at his brother, a snarl curling the edge of his lips.

'Just stay out of this!'

He took off, soaring through the sky. His damaged wing he had repaired. The piece that had been torn off was now replaced with metal.

'Lucas…' Reuben sighed after his brother, heart drowning in sadness. 'You really have changed.'

'He will never been the same again.'

Reuben bowed his head, his attention drifting towards the female that had spoken.

She had naked red skin, like freshly spilt blood, and was at least a head taller than him, with bright red hair that reached the bottom of her back.

An aberrant.

'The Red Messenger' Reuben said as he recognised her. 'I've heard of you.'

'My name is Fay' she introduced turning to him. 'And I will play my part.'

They looked together towards the horizon, and at the shrinking dot that was Lucas.

'A new story is beginning' the aberrant Fay said to Reuben. 'I can't wait to see how it ends.'

She strode away from him then, stepping through the frosty grass and towards the portal that led back into the Ancient World. Reuben spared one last glance briefly towards the white temple which sat at the base of a rocky cliff, before turning his back.

Lucas, my brother he thought. I hope the messenger is wrong about you…I hope you have not truly changed.

He walked away, following the red aberrant through the portal, and back to his home.

Back to the Ancient World.

The story continues in Angel of Stone